READS

DAVE SIM & GERHARD



READS

by

Dave Sim and Gerhard

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material in the production of another creative work.

Dave's dedication:
to
NORMAN MAILER
and all the
Armies of
the Night

Gerhard's dedication:

to possessors
of XX chromosomes
everywhere

Introduction:

Reads is very much an examination of creativity. Like any author, I am not unaware of the curiosity which exists regarding “the man behind the work”. If you are a rabid *Cerebus* fanatic or a casual reader, that curiosity can range between being very nearly obsessive and being the vaguest sort of temporary interest. A *Cerebus* fanatic, naturally enough, can't get enough. A casual reader (by now) will have gotten more than a lifetime supply of “Dave Sim and What He Thinks”. To satisfy one, I have to disappoint the other, and vice versa.

“The man behind the work” in the case of *Cerebus* is quite a can of worms (as you will see). Most of my viewpoints are minority viewpoints. It is one view that I do this intentionally — that it is just in my nature to be contrary to the accepted consensus on any given subject. There are few view-points that are widely shared that I don't find misguided, evasive, delusional or all three. One of my favourite expressions is that “a cynic is just a realist who hasn't been proven right — yet.” Had you told someone in 1970 that the President of the United States, the CIA, the FBI and other government agencies were conducting systematic and illegal acts of malice against American citizens, you would have been deemed paranoid, cynical, treasonous and insane (at the very least). If you had told someone that there would be a worldwide glut of oil in the early nineties and that the so-called Energy Crisis was a fabrication, the same would hold true. It is odd to me that both of these inescapable facts have made the vast majority of people not one whit less inclined to believe in whatever new Crisis du Jour is being trumpeted.

In my own case, five years ago it was widely believed that self-publishing was only possible and/or sensible in my own case. I was the exception which proved the rule that creators were far better off under the philanthropic wing of noble editors and publishers. “That's just Dave” is a refrain which has followed me for many years and which, I imagine, will follow me to the grave. “But don't you think...?” is a recurrent preamble in personal conversation. Of course I don't think that, I muse to myself as another rhetorical homily is mouthed in my direction; when have you ever heard me say anything remotely like that? On occasion, if I'm in a weak moment, I will be drawn into an extended exchange of viewpoints, refuting in painstaking detail the nonsense I'm having to deal with. After twenty minutes or a half an hour or an hour, there will come the pregnant, lengthy pause, followed by the inevitable “you've given me a lot to think about”: more aptly translated as “you've given me a lot to forget in the shortest time possible, since I have found my own position to be so full of holes I can scarcely believe what it is I've been saying. I must go away now and rationalise you out of existence.”

Reads is a mixture of autobiography, a meditation on the traditional role of the creator in a capitalistic society, the nature of creativity itself, a re-examination of the conclusions reached at the end of *Church & State*, and a big fight. Although each of these parts is separate, they spill over into one another. Each of the parts represents the other parts allegorically. *Reads* represents both a point of convergence and a breaking apart of the six-thousand-page *Cerebus* story line. As such, it also represents a point of convergence and a breaking apart of the *Cerebus* readership. If the reaction to it in collected form is comparable to the reaction to it in its serialisation, I feel pretty safe in saying that it will engage your attentions. At the end, you will either be amused, insulted, horrified, angry, hurt, resentful, acrimonious or newly aware.

If your sense of convergence with the story line is maintained throughout these pages, I'm afraid you don't win anything. You don't belong to a special club. It doesn't count towards your final grade and it is not worth extra credit. It will not make you more attractive to strangers, it will not cure illness or baldness, and it will not make you a better public speaker.

It is what it is.

You are what you are.

For those who don't quite make it through “the eye of the needle”, I still think there's a great deal to be derived from Reads, much that is worth thinking about. If I didn't think it was worth thinking about, I wouldn't have spent as much of the last fifteen years thinking about it as I did. And I certainly wouldn't have invested the time and energy necessary in transcribing it onto the printed page as I did over the last year. If you can find no connection between the Cerebus story line and the text pages contained herein, feel free to take a razor blade and remove all of the non-comics pages from your copy. A mountain without its peak intact is still, after all, a mountain.

continued...

For those who find themselves caught up in the rising narrative — who sense something Big up ahead and who, upon their arrival, find only a small something, something poisonous or nothing at all — I would urge you to backtrack to your point of divergence, the point where your disappointment and sense of betrayal became palpable. Start from that point and find your own summit. Weave the elements presented into something which has meaning for you. Tell yourself a story. Your story. Draw your own conclusions. Paint yourself your own Big Picture of What It All Means. A peak without a summit is still, after all, a peak.

Reads was, by far, the most complicated and intricate creative work I have ever attempted. It is very satisfying to me that I remain very pleased with it and proud of it six months after completion. Victor Reid and Viktor Davis proved to be fascinating and challenging companions for the six months that I spent with each of them — and for the fifteen years I spent preparing myself to bring them to life on the page.

These last few lines of this introduction bring a final closure to that lengthy process which began in 1979 as "book three of the other big book".

Thanks as always to Gerhard who hopes never to draw that damn Throne Room again for the rest of his life.

Dave Sim
Kitchener, Ontario
December 9, 1994

book three
leads

Victor Reid had exactly five hundred and fifty-six crowns remaining of his original advance payment for Ascension. Forever Palnu *languished in the bottom drawer of his desk (good riddance, he thought to himself), incomplete save for a sample chapter, a much-corrected and modified outline and a few disconnected fragments.* Côte d'Azur *(or, rather, a number of tantalizing passages and hastily scrawled notes) lounged seductively in various places around his study.*

Ignoring the latter was very much like forgetting Beth, a futile (albeit necessary) exercise in self-deception.

How had he come to this point in his life, he wondered, tapping the blank sheet of notepaper with the feathered end of his quill. What curious alignment of astrological bodies; what society-wide conspiracy had propelled him here into uncharted, undesired and undesirable waters?



For some years (sixteen, to be precise), Victor had been labouring in virtual obscurity on a series of historical fictions centered on the interwoven relationship of Cirinism and Kevillism in all geographic areas of Estarcion. Far from a new planetary configuration or universal conspiracy, it was the fact of Cirin's takeover of the city-state of Iest which had transformed his career (and, consequently, Victor himself). His modest and loyal following had begun to grow. As it did so, Victor had permitted himself to recognize only that he no longer had to worry about his ability to pay his monthly rent; that he was able to afford better quality notepaper and quills which lasted several pages instead of a few paragraphs.

As a result, That Black Day (as it was known to Victor in his innermost thoughts) had come as a complete surprise to him; That Black Day when he had entered his favourite reads store, *The Beguiled*, in search of a copy of his latest work, and had found it to be absent from its customary place: the rearmost section, lower left, second shelf from the bottom, under the designation "Ephemera". He had finally inquired if the store had failed to order it (an infrequent but not-altogether-unheard-of occurrence). The clerk had led him to an ornate, brightly-lit shelf near the front door, where he had proudly pointed to the work in question. "Your new home," he had declared, beaming. "Popular Authors" read the sign, beaming. Popular authors. Victor had gone directly from *The Beguiled* to the nearest tavern and had proceeded to get very, very drunk; very, very quickly.

Over a period of several unproductive and liquor-sodden weeks he had made an uneasy peace with his new situation, rationalising that the placement and status of his works fell outside of his jurisdiction and should, as a consequence, be outside of his concern. He began to joke at conferences and personal appearances that he viewed himself as the Least Popular of the Popular Authors. After a time, people stopped laughing at this *petit bon mot* and merely looked perplexed.

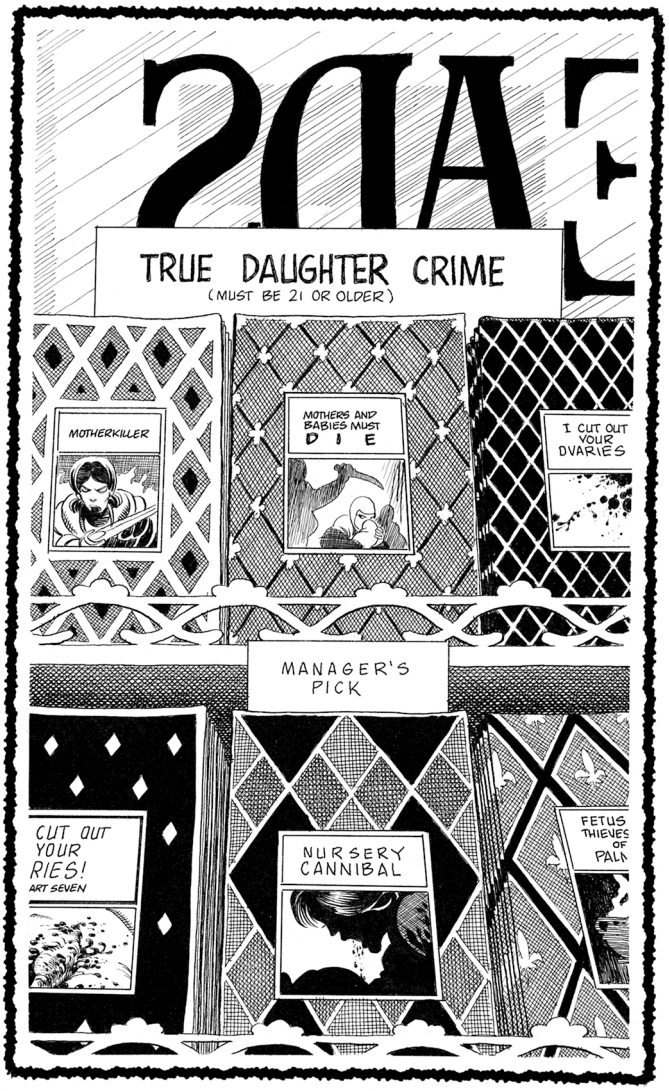
The effect of this on Victor was devastating and he had retreated into a sullen state of deliberate silence and gloom, willfully ignoring his surroundings at promotional events and convocations. So morose and self-absorbed did he become that his mood infected the swelling ranks of his coterie of readers. They exchanged pleasantries with one another and bantered good-naturedly about Victor's symbolism and their favourites among his many characters; but, as they approached the front of the autograph line, their conversation subsided into murmurs and whispers and, finally, into a grim silence which mirrored Victor's own. As a result, these processions came to resemble nothing so much as a line of mourners, paying their final respects to a recently departed friend of long-standing (it was not unusual for them to remark to one another on leaving his presence that Victor seemed "very lifelike and natural").

When the requisite number of signatures had been duly rendered on copies of his work, small scraps of paper, as well as the occasional article of clothing and exposed limb, Victor further reinforced his status as the "dearly departed" by doing exactly that: retreating, with unseemly haste, to his hotel room.

There, he would embrace the bottle of cognac which was mandated as part of his appearance fee. Having dispatched the better part of its contents in short order, Victor would lie back on the bed, fully clothed, cross his hands over his chest and fall into a troubled, though dreamless, slumber. The absence of a priest, the discordant sound of his snoring and his inevitable awakening with a pounding headache and a desert-dry throat would be the only elements which were at variance with the perfect sanctity of the tableau, which might have served as an altar piece in some mythical Church of Tarim (Literary Icon) over a small plaque bearing the title: His Final Rest.



The *Palnu* series had been, from the outset, an unsalvageable mess. Cirinism and Kevillism never having taken hold in that most independent and wide-open of frontier city-states, Victor had decided long ago that it merited a single read at best. He had envisioned that read as a straightforward morality tale concerning a fictitious member of the House of Tavers (Lady


TRUE DAUGHTER CRIME
(MUST BE 21 OR OLDER)
MOTHERKILLER
MOTHERS AND BABIES MUST D I E
I CUT OUT YOUR OVARIES
MANAGER'S PICK
CUT OUT YOUR RIES!
ART SEVEN
NURSERY CANNIBAL
FETUS THIEVES OF PALM

Howe, a widow with two children) and the effect upon her of Lord Julius' brief marriage to Astoria. He had crafted a simple cautionary tale around her as she wrestled with the Kevillist ideal of "choice above all", documenting the gradual destruction this brings about in the life of a simple and good-hearted woman who, previously, had derived all of her joy and satisfaction from caring for her offspring. Cirin's occupational government had placed it very high on their list of "recommended reads" shortly after the invasion. As this had taken place during one of Victor's week-long visits to the *Bull & Finch* he was ignorant of that fact, though the effect was proving inescapable.



Victor had always regarded illustrators as something between an unnecessary evil and a terminal malignancy in the world of reads publishing. There was a perverse streak within every one of them (Victor was certain of this) which compelled them to render everything within their engravings except that which was described in the author's text. First among equals in willful desecration was M. Zulli, who lived in the next street over from Victor. When *Lady of Palnu* (upon which M. Zulli had been inflicted) was published, Victor had been horrified to discover that sweet, matronly, gray-haired Lady Howe, she of the rosy cheeks and even rosier disposition, had been rendered as a buxom harlot, with sultry gaze, painted lips and cascades of raven hair. It had been too much for Victor to bear, a final straw upon the haystack, and he had gone directly to the perpetrator's lair, there to demand satisfaction of the most extreme sort. Cowed and ashen in the face of Victor's fury, M. Zulli's housekeeper had, without demur, ushered the red-faced author directly to the work area on the second floor.

There, before Victor's eyes, motionless as a statue, wearing a form-fitting gown of black velvet, her hands pressed to her cheeks, her eyes and mouth frozen in astonishment, was the model who served as the basis for M. Zulli's Lady Howe. M. Zulli himself appeared completely unperturbed by the unannounced interruption.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, without looking up, hunched over his illustration table, his hand moving smoothly and meticulously in long, parallel strokes.

Victor had introduced himself as the author of *Lady of Palnu*. He had then poured forth a litany of extravagant compliments on the subject of M. Zulli's artistic style, his attention to detail, his ability to capture and sustain a mood, the curiously affecting interplay of light and shadow that was a hallmark of his works.

"Mm," Zulli had said. Like most members of his occupation, he was a man of few words, most of them unintelligible. Politely, Victor had asked if he might be permitted to watch the master illustrator at work: he who had breathed such vivid life into Victor's humble tale.

"I guess. Just don't touch anything," Zulli had acquiesced before lapsing into silence.

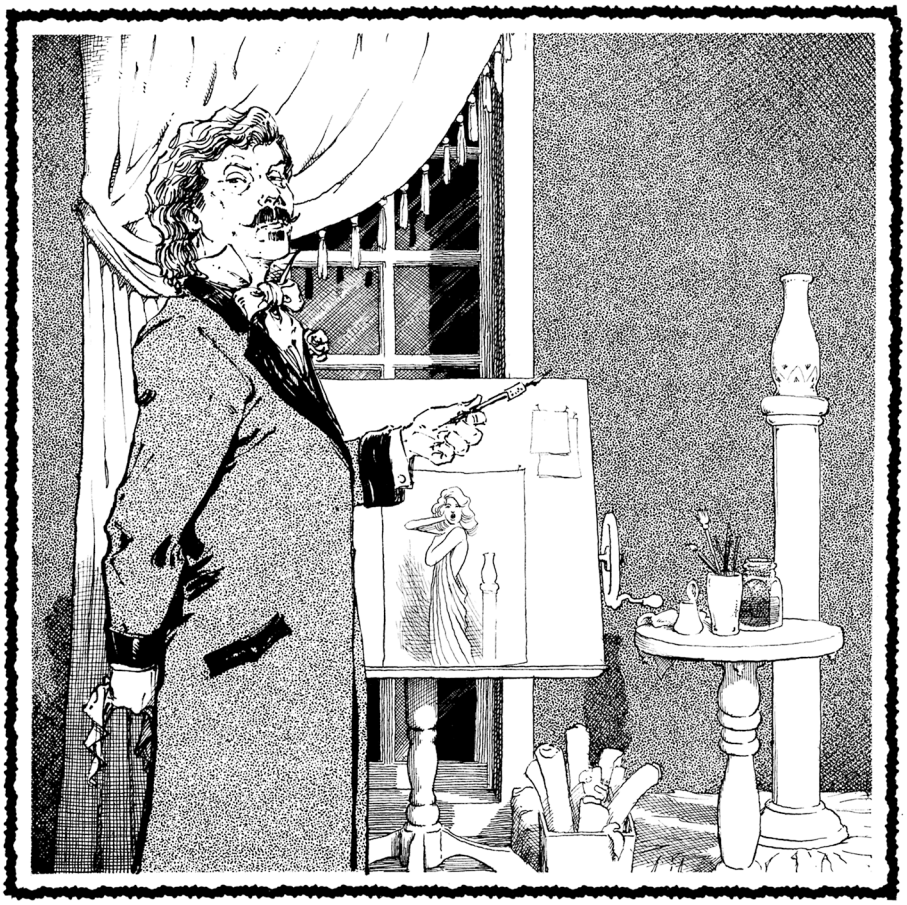
For a short while, Victor had maintained the pretense of scrutinizing the stubby, begrimed fingers and the bent and battered rendering implement. He had soon realized that Zulli had no more awareness of Victor's presence in the room than he did of the fact that the socks he wore were of different colours (one was a crimson and navy plaid, the other a light beige). Victor had quietly eased himself onto a small wooden stool after covering it with his handkerchief and contented himself with staring, unashamedly, at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The studio had become a still life: "Illustrator, Author and *Modèle Surprise*". Over the course of the next several hours, M. Zulli's right hand and forearm represented the only movement in the cavernous room.

Beth.

Her name was Beth. For several weeks, Victor was a regular visitor to the studio of M. Zulli, where he passed most of his afternoons. Zulli had paid him no more attention on his subsequent visits than he had on the first.

Victor had persuaded his publisher, House of Shadows, to draw up a contract for four more *Palnu* reads, each of which was to feature the soon-to-be redoubtable Lady Howe. They sold briskly, though confusion was widespread among his readership when Victor's sweet, matronly lead character became involved in a series of ever more wildly implausible adventures as a defender of good morals, who seemed always to be staggering through the seamier neighbourhoods of Palnu City in varying stages of *dishabille* at the conclusion of each chapter (and, as word of this new theme in Victor's work began to spread, they sold very briskly indeed).

When M. Zulli would be called away to greet a visitor (most of whom, unlike Victor, were good enough to wait in the parlour) or when the illustrator would take one of his infrequent lunch breaks, Victor would engage Beth in conversation. Or, rather, he would attempt to engage Beth in conversation. Victor had discovered that models made illustrators seem eloquent by contrast. And, so, these conversations took the form of extended monologues on Victor's part on a wide variety of subjects, punctuated by a limited selection of grunts and shrugs on Beth's part (each, of course, ranging between the charming and the sublime) with one notable exception. The exception came on that fateful day when, Victor, in his best and



most chivalrous manner, had held forth on the subject of models and their financial compensation. He had pointed out that, without models, illustrations could not exist, and, further, without illustrations, reads could not exist. In short, he had concluded, it was impossible to overrate the importance of models to the literary world. Models, Authors and Illustrators were bound together; their shared fate was the cornerstone, nay, the very foundation of the burgeoning reads industry.

"Yeah?" Beth had said, gazing intently at Victor as if she were seeing him (really *seeing* him) for the first time.

He had fairly bounded home from that session, his feet scarcely touching the cobblestones, his heart brimming, spilling over with soon-to-be-requited love. And so it had been Another Black Day (it seemed to Victor that his existence consisted entirely of Black Days, strung like pearls on strands of ennui and uneventfulness) when he had arrived at M. Zulli's studio, only to discover a different model who vaguely resembled Beth, her clothes in disarray, her right hand demurely covering an exposed breast, frozen in mid-stagger.

"Uh. Where's Beth?" Victor had inquired.

"She wanted a share of my royalties," said M. Zulli, turning away from his work and looking at Victor (really *looking* at him) for the first time. "So I fired her."

Pleading a crushing workload, Victor had taken his leave of M. Zulli's studio and home for the last time.

He had set up an appointment with his publisher at House of Shadows and had explained that, virtually overnight, he had developed an insoluble writer's block which made the completion of *Forever Palnu* an impossibility. Since *In Palnu's Shadow* was now entering its third printing in as many weeks, Victor's publisher took a rather dim view of his favourite author (a status Victor had achieved without his knowledge somewhere between the first printing's release date and the receipt of reorders for the second) adopting such a defeatist attitude. In fact, he viewed Victor's defeatism in the same light in which he regarded his printing presses when they insisted on discharging buckled and torn reams of expensive paper instead of clean, saleable and perfectly replicated copies: as a personal affront, maliciously intended.

It was quite impossible to release Victor from his contract, he said. They had already advertised *Forever Palnu* and *Crimes of Palnu* (this, of course, wasn't true; advertisements for House of Shadows reads were never placed until at least two months after publication. Victor's publisher saw no reason to waste good money on advertising until he could be certain that a read was successful enough to warrant it). Victor was adamant. There would be no *Forever Palnu* and there would be no *Crimes of Palnu*. He said he was prepared to return the total advance of twenty crowns which had been rendered on both titles; he would write a check that very moment (this, of course, wasn't true; leaving aside the fact that Victor had left his chequebook at home, he had exactly eight crowns and seven copper bits left to his name, assuming his grocer hadn't yet attempted to cash the cheque he had written that morning). Victor's publisher asked what compensation Victor intended for all of the advertising and promotion money he had invested, all of the money he had already spent on designs and special in-store displays (in point of fact that amount was exactly eight crowns and seven copper bits less than Victor had in his account, pending resolution of the grocer question).

"What do you suggest," Victor had asked, fuming inwardly.

"I don't like being unreasonable," Victor's publisher had said (this, of course, wasn't true; he liked very much to be unreasonable so long as being unreasonable produced lucrative results). "Suppose you sign an agreement assigning House of Shadows all rights and title to *Lady of Palnu*, *In Palnu's Shadow* and *Palnu's Underworld* and we'll just close the book on *Forever Palnu* and *Crimes of Palnu*."

"Fine," Victor had said; he just wanted to be rid of all reminders of Beth, M. Zulli and the whole sordid mess. Victor's publisher had stood up from behind his desk and walked to his office door.

"I'll have the agreement drawn up and ready for you to sign tomorrow morning," he had said.

"Fine," Victor had said, sufficiently irritated that he wasn't about to expend any of his creative energies in coming up with a synonymous rejoinder. And with that, he had left House of Shadows for the last time.

Victor's now-former publisher had summoned one of his messengers and told him to make a reservation for a private room for two at the Café Royale; he wanted it lavish, but intimate. Victor's now-former publisher had suddenly felt like celebrating.

He then had summoned a second messenger and told him to relay a message to his wife, informing her that he would be working quite late and had no idea when he might be home.



And so it was that Victor had discharged his contractual obligations to the well-regarded but economically


PALNU'S SHADOW
tor Reid
LADY of PALNU
by
Victor Reid
PALNU'S UNDERWORLD
by Victor Reid

unsound (in the world of reads publishing, the two were virtually synonymous) House of Shadows.

Ignorant of the extent and scope of his new popularity (though, by the same token, now something of a connoisseur of various cognacs and their respective abilities to induce and enhance slumber), he now prepared himself for a shopping expedition. Metaphorically speaking, he intended to take the wicker basket of his literary future to the entrepreneurial fresh produce stalls of the free marketplace. And there, having thumped the skins of viability, having poked the firmness of verisimilitude and having examined all contractual undersides for the telltale bruising of malfeasance, Victor would then endeavour to make his selection. And having, by this means, formed a more perfect union of market share musculature and the untapped potential of his literary prowess (or a close approximation thereof), Victor was certain that he could then return to the careful honing of his chosen craft without further impediment or distraction.

In short, Victor was going to a Reads Trade Show to find a new publisher.



Trade shows were a new variable in the ever-more-complicated world of reads publishing, distinct from the smaller, reader-oriented conferences, in that attendance was limited to publishers, distributors and proprietors of reads stores. Though not officially sanctioned, authors and illustrators had recently been granted limited access to the social events, so long as they behaved and cleaned up after themselves.

Victor had been at a literary dinner some months before where Henry Wotton had held forth, at some length, on the subject of trade shows (there was a general consensus, at the time, that Wotton was the only author of sufficiently perverse sensibility to actually attend such an event).

Wotton had begun with a few innocuous observations on the various definitions of the word "trade". It could encompass a simple exchange of one commodity for another, between individuals. It defined an occupation which was not regarded well enough to be called a profession. In the world of business, it was used to describe an individual company's total transactions involving commodities, services and currency. In the many civilised countries and city-states of Estarcion, "trade" was the term used to describe the internal exchanges of goods and services and currency among its populace, as well as larger exchanges with other peoples and other governments.

Of course, he had added, "trade" was also a term used in the field of prostitution.

It was an article of faith with Victor and others that Henry Wotton, at a specific point in any given conversation, would cross the clearly defined border between the appropriate and the inappropriate. Several of the ladies at the table emitted small, mewing noises comparable to those uttered by kittens in protest of rough treatment. Several of the gentlemen scowled disapprovingly in Wotton's direction. These reactions would have been sufficient to drive anyone of good sense, hastily, from table to domicile, there to compose notes of abject apology in the vain hope of salvaging what remained of their societal status. As Henry Wotton had no societal status to speak of, these reactions were completely without effect.

"Rough trade," he had continued (at this, Victor could hear a low rumbling sound rising in the throat of the gentleman to his left), was a term used to describe males and females in the aforementioned field whose aspect was of the lowest and meanest sort; violent, bestial creatures who brought those qualities to bear on the world's oldest profession.

"Anyway," Wotton had said (recognizing that he had stretched the boundaries of propriety at the staid old Café Royale to a new, hitherto undreamt of, frontier), "I attended one of these...'trade' shows recently."

Here he had added such a salacious emphasis to the word "trade" that the new and unpredictable connection (a conversational trick for which he was notorious) was made, instantly, in everyone's mind. His monologue picked up momentum as he described a well-known reads publisher who had approached him at the "get-acquainted" reception. He added the same emphasis to "get-acquainted" that he had used to underscore "trade" and several of his listeners (Victor included) had begun to smile, in spite of themselves. "The fellow expressed interest in my future plans," Wotton had said, warming to his subject, "and enquired as to their nature. I told him that while I had no specific future plans, I had every intention of continuing in my present occupation. I then asked if I was given to understand that he himself had certain... interests in that area as well. He could scarcely conceal his eagerness.

"'Oh, yes,' he said, 'many interests...many...varied interests.' I thought the adjective a trifle impertinent, but I replied with a practised equanimity. 'Variety,' I said, 'is the spice of life, or so I am told.' At this, I lowered my lashes and peered at him with a demure, but significant, sidelong glance. 'I think,' he said, his voice deepening with drama, 'that, perhaps, our interests might be...mutual, then.'

"'All things are possible, one supposes,' I replied diffidently, hoping to cool his ardour, which had become too demonstratively – apparent – and was, as a result,



attracting the unwelcome attention of bystanders.

"'I think I am safe in saying, were our interests to lie in the same direction, then an...arrangement might be mutually beneficial,' he persisted, a slight tremor evident in his voice and a fine mist of perspiration forming on his upper lip.

"'I had discreetly removed a small fan from my vest pocket as he spoke and, snapping it open with a flourish, and using it to cover the lower half of my face, I replied, 'Indeed? You must tell me more.' Before he could clarify his assertions, we were joined by another publisher of my acquaintance whom I greeted warmly. The first fellow bristled visibly at this unwelcome intrusion.

"'So, the two of you have had...past dealings, then,' he had said, his voice dripping venom.

"'Oh, yes,' I had replied, casually dropping my shoulder and in the process exposing a small expanse of shirt between my lapel and my tie. 'Many dealings. Many...satisfactory dealings.'

"'Many,' the newcomer had agreed, beaming contentedly.

"'We were just discussing my...future plans,' I informed him, lightly fanning myself.

"'How fortuitous,' the new arrival had murmured, 'the very thing that was uppermost in my mind in coming here.'"

Much of the rich detail of the rest of Wotton's story had been lost to Victor in the general hilarity which greeted each new embellishment and improvisation.

He did remember that, by the story's conclusion, Wotton had lowered his jacket on both sides to mid-bicep and that the three of them had departed the reception, Wotton with a publisher on each arm. They had adjourned to the author's rooms for a "friendly drink" before "consummating" the lucrative details of their respective publishing agreements.



Victor had arrived at the Regency for the fourth annual Davis, Diamond & Madison Seminar, Roundtable and Sales Conference (fortunately a hotel employee had found this lengthy appellation as confusing as Victor had and had mercifully added "Reads Trade Show" in parentheses to the listing on the hotel directory) shortly after sunset.

At the registration desk, he had been provided with a shopping bag that was the size of a small suitcase, which contained his *Guide to Seminar, Roundtable and Conference Events, Rules of Conduct*, a current catalogue of Davis, Diamond & Madison "product" (which was as thick as *Victor Reid's Complete Works* would have been, had such a volume existed), as well as a full transcript of the previous year's Roundtable (under the prodigious and unwieldy title of *Saturation: Being an Examination of Economic Forces at Work in the Reads Marketplace*, with subheadings "Hot versus Coolest: When Titans Clash", "Extracting That Last Copper Bit: Crowbar versus Tongs" and "Unnumbered T'Capmin Bank Accounts: Towards a Secure Future"). In addition, Victor had been given a name badge which read "Hello my name is Victoria Reis". Attached to it was a small blue ribbon inscribed with the word "Vendor". Grimacing slightly, Victor was in the process of affixing it to his lapel and preparing to launch the next phase of his literary career as "Victoria Reis, Vendor-at-Large", when he nearly collided with an extremely tall individual who had appeared as if from thin air.

"I'm very excited," the tall individual had said.

Victor had laughed out loud, Henry Wotton's reminiscence being very much on his mind.

"Are you?" Victor had asked.

"Oh, yes," the tall individual had replied, diplomatically ignoring Victor's unseemly outburst.

"*Very* excited. I'm Denis Eastman, publisher of Kevin's Kitchen Enterprises. I've been following your work for years. All of us have at Kevin's Kitchen. We're *all* very, very excited."

The mental image conjured by this assertion was almost too much for poor Victor and it was only through the greatest self-possession that he was able to stifle a maniacal fit of giggling. Once he had contained himself, but before he could venture a reply, one of the marble pillars had detached itself from a nearby wall and edged closer to him. Attached to the pillar, at Victor's eye level, was a name tag which read "Mike Prosserman, Publisher, Vertigo Horse". Suddenly, Victor realized that it wasn't a marble pillar at all, but one of the tallest human beings he had ever seen in his life, whose cream-coloured suit, fair complexion and light-blond hair had merged with the beige column against which he had been leaning so thoroughly as to cause him to vanish from sight like a chameleon on a damp log.

"I think I can give you the big push you need," the pillar had informed him.

"Excuse me?" Victor had said, now thoroughly lost in the land of Wotton imagery and seized by a claustrophobic panic as the crowd pressed the two giants


DAVIS, DIAMOND & MADISON
HELLO, MY NAME IS
VICTORIA REIS
VEN

closer to him, effectively blocking his view of the room (as well as most of the light from the large chandelier overhead).

"Vertigo Horse specializes in three things" (these he proceeded to tick off on fingers which, at close proximity, appeared to be the length of Victor's forearm). "One, the big push; two, proper handling; three, hands-on participation. I think you'll find us the best choice for handling you properly," he had said by way of conclusion, handing Victor his card.

Victor had felt a definite kinship with the embossed silhouette of a horse's head and the series of concentric rings vanishing into its furrowed brow. He had wrestled with a reply, but all of Wotton's rejoinders seemed both inadequate and inappropriate to the situation. Victor could almost feel a price tag hanging from his forehead with "Reduced to Clear" marked upon it in bold letters.

"Are you staying in the hotel?" the pillar had asked.

"Er – yes, I am," Victor had stammered.

"Why don't I come up to your room with my staff? I'm sure they'll want to be in on this."

"I'm...that is...I haven't checked in yet. Some...uh... mix-up at the desk."

"I'm in rooms four-fifty, four-fifty-two. Come up tonight for a drink after the exhibit room closes. We'll do business."

And, with that, the pillar was gone. Shaken, Victor had forgotten entirely about Denis Eastman, who had startled him by whispering in his ear:

"I'm not as big as Vertigo Horse, but I'm sure I can get the job done for you. Think about it."

And, with that, Denis Eastman was gone as well.

Somewhere, Victor thought, somewhere in this hotel there is a bottle of cognac with my name on it.

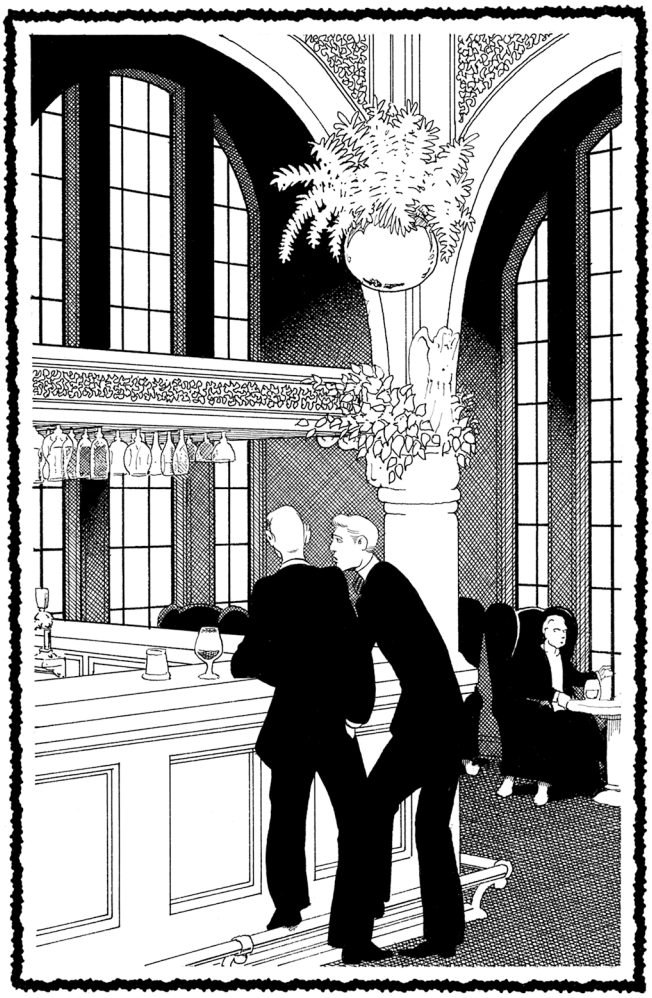
And, with that, Victor was gone as well.



The hotel bar made the lobby seem underpopulated by contrast. It had taken Victor the better part of an hour to edge his way a few yards towards the far wall where a pyramid of bottles and suspended glasses, visible over a sea of heads, marked the location of the oasis he sought. The closer he got, the slower his progress and the more the commonest of courtesies (his own included) became an endangered species. At last, his intolerance of large crowds and his reluctance to use the force necessary to advance his position had overcome his thirst and he had turned to leave. At that point, he had discovered that departure was only marginally easier than advancement and he was forced to move sideways along lines of least resistance as he sought an opening in the wall of human flesh.

For a period of some minutes, Victor had found himself pressed against an individual bearing a publisher's badge (again, taller than any human being of Victor's acquaintance; he had begun mentally composing an outline for a fantasy read: *Land of the Giant Publishers*) with the single word "Deviant" scrawled across it in shaky crimson letters. At first, Victor had thought the fellow was endeavouring to address him, but soon realized that his cold and penetrating gaze was focused firmly in the middle distance. He was rolling two metal balls in his left hand and waxing eloquent on the subject of strawberries. Specifically, his strawberries. From what Victor could gather, someone or other had taken the fellow's strawberries without his knowledge or consent, but that he had a good idea as to the perpetrator's identity and whereabouts. His strawberries were much admired, it seemed, and consequently represented a great temptation both to the perpetrator and other unsavory characters of his acquaintance. As an aside, a kind of historical footnote, the fellow had mentioned that he himself had been instrumental, a pioneer of sorts, in the introduction of strawberries into Estarcion and a key figure in their renewed popularity at a time when there had been a real danger that strawberries, as we knew them, might have ceased to exist altogether had it not been for his intercession. He had even given some strawberries, at a point in the now distant past, to an individual whose identity he was not at liberty to divulge (whom he proceeded to describe in such specific terms that there could be no doubt as to his identity: best-selling author and illustrator Ronin Sin). While he in no way regretted the gift of these strawberries, nor did he begrudge the unnamed individual his own substantial strawberry holdings which had been acquired through the intervening years, it troubled him, troubled him deeply that...

It was at this juncture that Victor had found himself swept to one side by a flying wedge composed of trade show attendees who had elected to attempt a final "death or glory" assault in the direction of the pyramid of bottles looming on the horizon. When he recovered his balance, Victor found himself face-to-face with another publisher (this one of uncharacteristically traditional proportions), Kim Grinch of Hey, Buddy Enterprises. Without preamble or salutation, he asked if Victor had had any dealings with (and here he named an editor who had recently left his employ). Victor acknowledged that he had recently had lunch with the woman in question and several mutual friends and acquaintances. A look of keen and



malevolent interest had taken hold of Grinch's boyish features and he had launched into a series of stinging indictments (this was no mere exaggeration, for each of his assertions had been prefaced with "The Accused did, on the date in question…", "The Accused did willfully cause to…", "The Accused did with malice aforethought…", and so on).

It was opportune that at that very moment several attendees had discovered one of their number attempting to conceal a half-filled tankard of ale and a wrestling match had ensued for possession of it, which had opened up a small stretch of carpeted floor adjacent to Victor's position. Stepping nimbly into this unexpected opening, Victor might have made real progress to the exit had not his path been blocked by yet another publisher (though only slightly taller than Victor, he appeared to weigh as much as Eastman and Prosserman combined), waving a packet of cigarettes.

"No, thank you," Victor said, "I don't smoke."

"No, no," the fellow protested. "The card. The…card." He indicated one of those small cardboard representations of a figure from the world of competitive sport which were offered as premiums on certain brands of tobacco products.

"Your next…read," he gasped (though his lungs doubtless consumed a disproportionately large volume of the available air, that was still a commodity for which, at the moment, demand outstripped supply by a wide margin), "on the…backs…eighty…cards…limited… autographed."

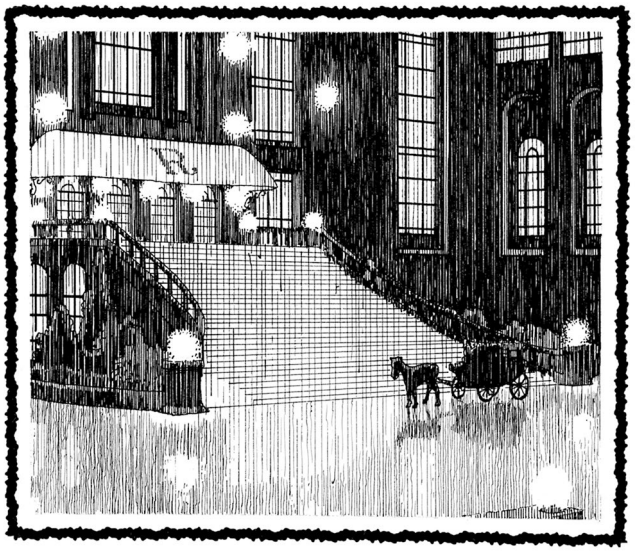
Alas (though such a rapid sequence of serendipitous events would have stretched the credulity of the reader of even the most melodramatic of reads), Dame Fortune smiled upon Victor once more. A near-sighted Administrator of Records for one of the larger distribution concerns chose that moment to mistake the publisher for a small sofa and, as the two of them plunged floor-ward, with identical expressions of complete astonishment, a substantial co-mingling of assistant editors, production managers, art directors and a retail liaison was obliged, domino-like, to follow suit.

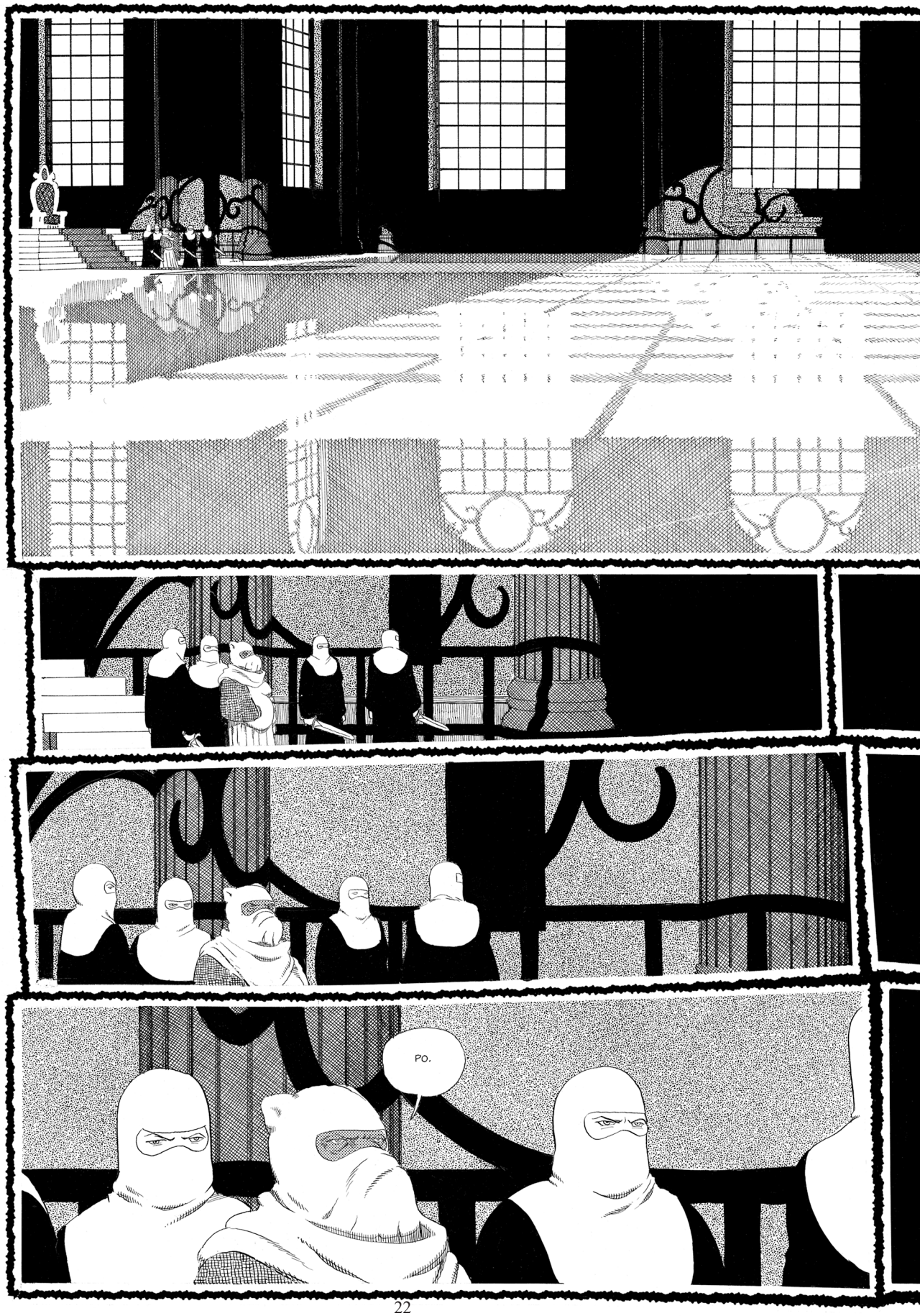
Victor made good his escape. Half-walking, half-running down the hallway, he was joined, very much in the athletic spirit of things, by still and yet another publisher who, trotting alongside, had said, "You don't know me, but I want to offer you the contract of a lifetime for your next read." Recollecting that this had been his avowed purpose in attending the Trade Show in the first place, Victor had slowed down to listen.

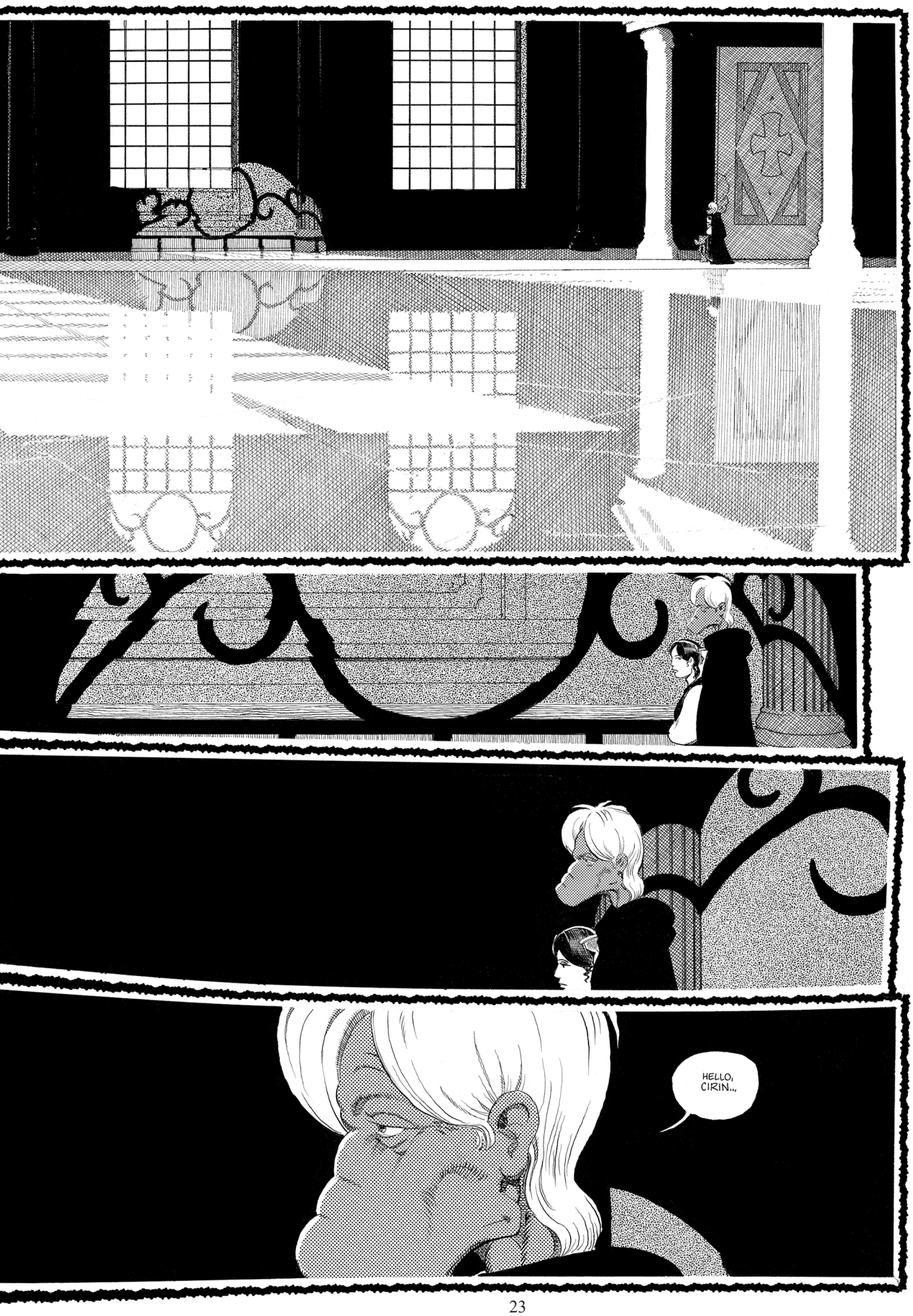
"I want to offer you everything," the fellow was saying, his eyes bright with some manner of entrepreneurial fever. "*Everything*. Every last copper bit that comes in will be yours and yours alone. I won't keep anything."

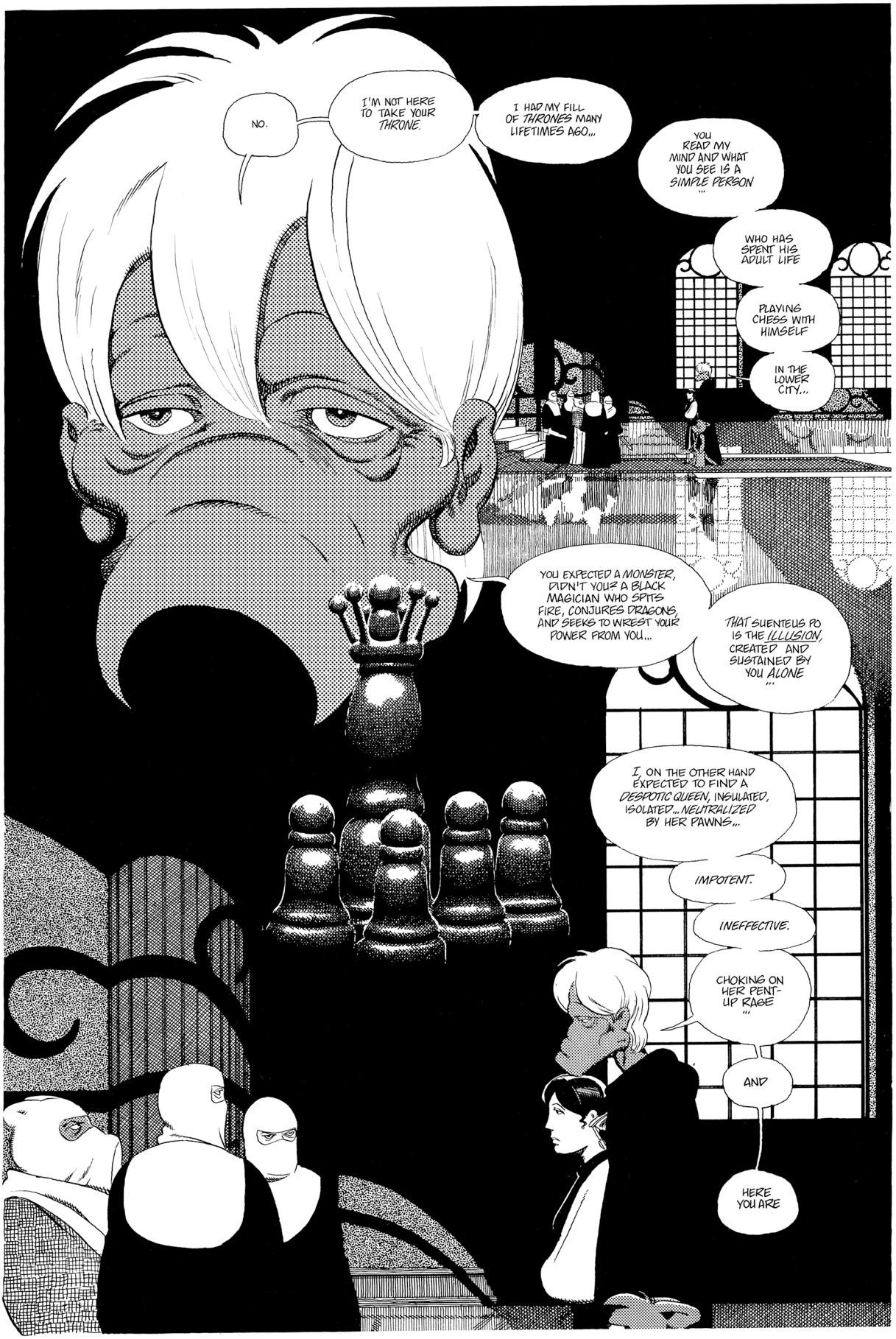
"That's wonderful," Victor had said. "But — what will you live on? How will you pay your printer?"

Victor had watched, sympathetically, as the light had vanished from the man's eyes, as he had sagged within his tailored suit like a punctured balloon. Without a word, the fellow had turned and walked away; out through the Regency's ornate, polished doors; out into the grim, dark night; out into the swirling snow; where he was soon lost from view.

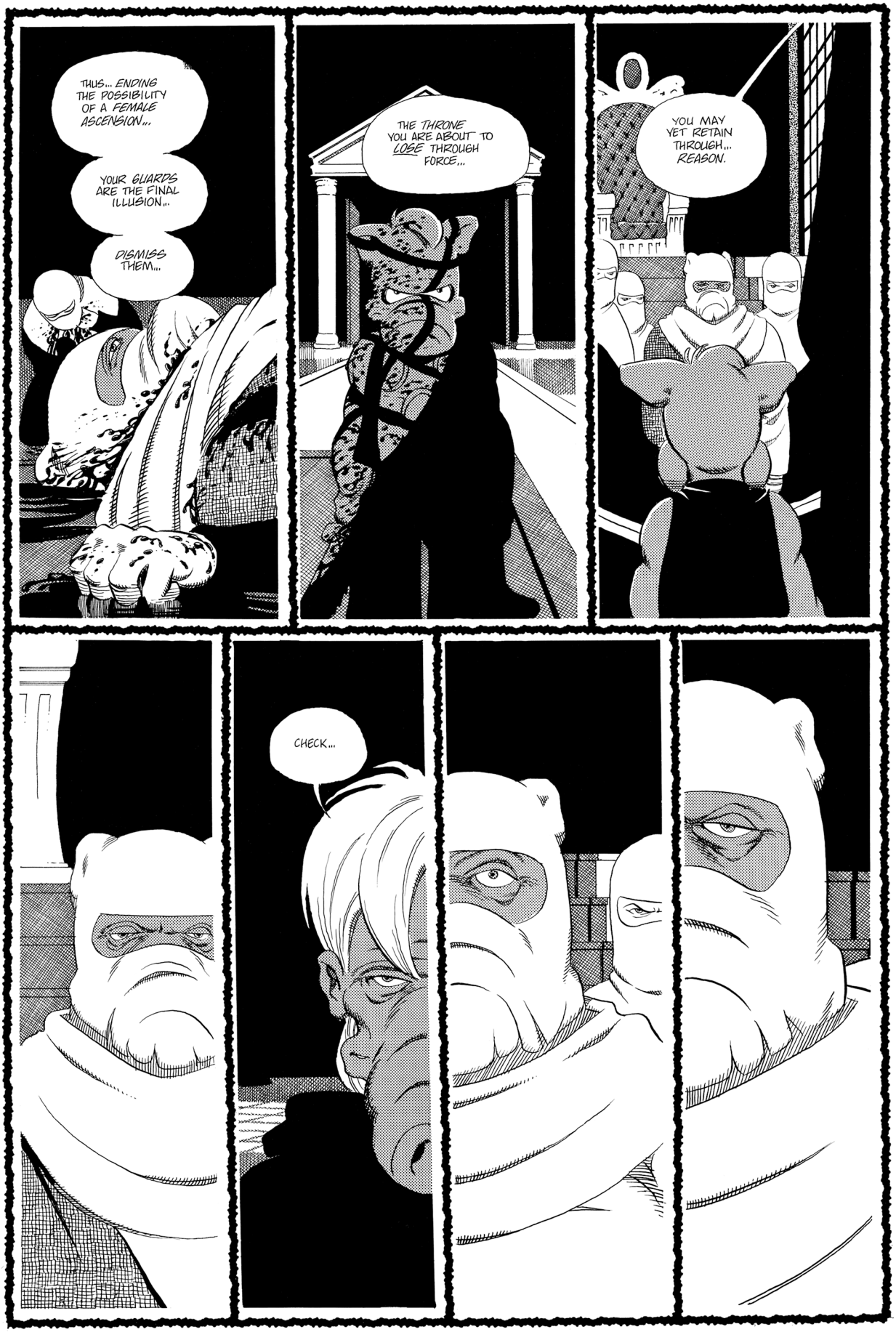


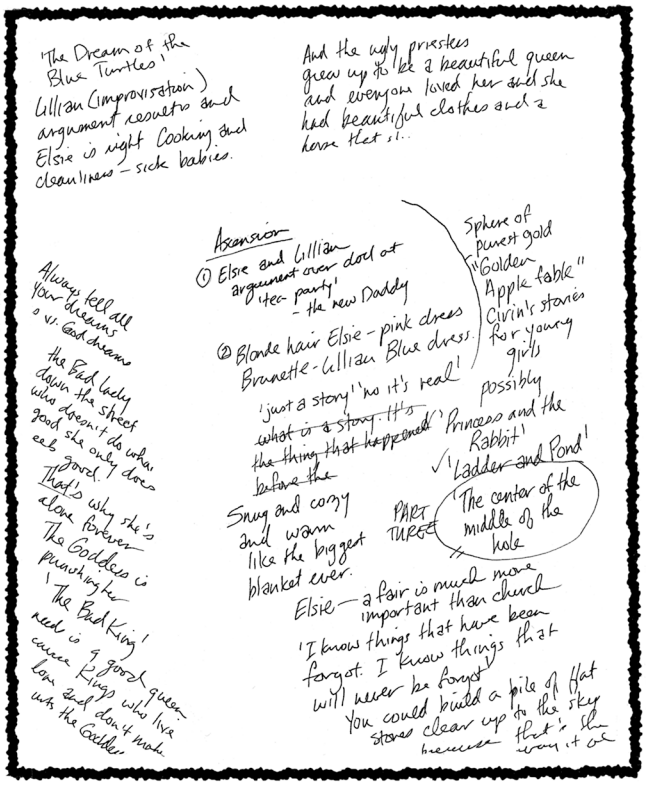

PO.


HELLO, CIRIN...


NO.
I'M NOT HERE TO TAKE YOUR THRONE.
I HAD MY FILL OF THRONES MANY LIFETIMES AGO...
YOU READ MY MIND AND WHAT YOU SEE IS A SIMPLE PERSON ...
WHO HAS SPENT HIS ADULT LIFE
PLAYING CHESS WITH HIMSELF
IN THE LOWER CITY...
YOU EXPECTED A MONSTER, DIDN'T YOU? A BLACK MAGICIAN WHO SPITS FIRE, CONJURES DRAGONS, AND SEEKS TO WREST YOUR POWER FROM YOU...
THAT SUENTEUS PO IS THE ILLUSION, CREATED AND SUSTAINED BY YOU ALONE ...
I, ON THE OTHER HAND EXPECTED TO FIND A DESPOTIC QUEEN, INSULATED, ISOLATED... NEUTRALIZED BY HER PAWNS...
IMPOTENT.
INEFFECTIVE.
CHOKING ON HER PENT-UP RAGE ...
AND
HERE YOU ARE


TRUTH AND ILLUSION, CIRIN
TRUTH IS WHAT REMAINS WHEN ALL ILLUSIONS HAVE BEEN STRIPPED AWAY...
THAT IS THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION WHICH ECHOES ...
AND RE-ECHOES WITHIN THESE WALLS ...
THAT IS TRUTH.
EITHER UNDER YOUR TELEPATHIC ORDERS ...OR OF THEIR OWN VOLITION... YOUR GUARDS ARE ABOUT TO ATTACK US...
CEREBUS WILL THEN CUT THE FIVE OF YOU DOWN... IN COLD BLOOD... WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT...
THE 'ENDGAME' HAS BEGUN
ASTORIA AND I WILL DIE QUICKLY...
UNITING THE EASTERN AND WESTERN CHURCHES ...
UNDER HIS ABSOLUTE AND UNDISPUTED RULE...


THUS... ENDING THE POSSIBILITY OF A FEMALE ASCENSION...
YOUR GUARDS ARE THE FINAL ILLUSION...
DISMISS THEM...
THE THRONE YOU ARE ABOUT TO LOSE THROUGH FORCE...
YOU MAY YET RETAIN THROUGH... REASON.
CHECK...


'The Dream of the Blue Turtles'
Lillian (improvisation) argument resumes and Elsie is right. Cooking and cleanliness – sick babies.
And the ugly priestess grew up to be a beautiful queen and everyone loved her and she had beautiful clothes and a horse that sl...
Ascension
① Elsie and Lillian argument over deed of 'tea party' – the new Daddy
② Blonde hair Elsie – pink dress
Brunette – Lillian Blue dress.
'just a story' 'no it's real'
~~what is a story. It's the thing that happened~~
~~before the~~
Snug and cozy and warm like the biggest blanket ever.
Sphere of purest gold
"Golden Apple fable"
Givin's stories for young girls
possibly
Princess and the Rabbit'
✓'~~Ladder and Pond~~'
PART THREE
The center of the middle of the hole
Elsie – a fair is much more important than church
'I know things that have been forgot. I know things that will never be forgot'
You could build a pile of Hat stores clear up to the sky
that's how it
Always feel all your dreams
v. Good dreams
the Bad lady down the street who doesn't do what good she only does eeb good.
That's why she's alone forever
The Goddess is preventing her
'The Bad King'
need is a good queen
Kings who live
and don't make
with the Goddess

Two thousand CROWNS.
Across from Victor Reid had sat Mike Prosserman with a duplicate of the contract which now vibrated noticeably in Victor's hand. Some time before, the two had begun a tour through the densely packed type of the draft agreement. Prosserman was Victor's guide, reading each passage aloud and unravelling the interwoven complexities of the contract's legalese for the author's benefit.

The agreements which Victor had signed with House of Shadows had been a mere page in length, consisting of a deadline for delivery of the finished "product", an agreed-upon date for payment and the amount of that payment. If the House of Shadows contract had said simply, "Here, Victor, this is a red rose and this is a yellow rose," then the Vertigo Horse contract was a horticultural history lesson which encompassed and contained all manner of explications of floral differences and niceties. The garden was vast and complex, indeed, and like the dutiful freshman student he was, Victor had applied himself with solemn visage and furrowed brow to seeking after a true understanding of each clause, each variation, each subtle distinction between legalistic stigma, style, sepal and stamen. Prosserman, for his part, had spoken slowly and thoughtfully as the two of them regarded, metaphorically, each new flower bed in its numerical turn.

"Ah," Victor would say. Or, "mm." Or, "I see."

In truth, he retained little of Prosserman's laborious explanations of foreign licensing, ancillary rights, translation, reversion clauses or the various so forths and so on's. But, flower bed by flower bed, Victor had persevered and, as a new self-awareness of the extent and completeness of his ignorance threatened, at any moment, to quite overwhelm him, his various rejoinders became ever more earnest and enthusiastic.

"Ah, yes, of course," Victor would say. Or, "Mm. That makes a great deal of sense." Or, "I see. I see exactly."

He had already decided that he would go through the contract later that night, at home, with a dictionary at his side. He would endeavour to translate it, word by word, into the language with which he earned his livelihood.

The charade had continued through the first several pages. Hopelessly lost and cast adrift in a veritable sea of unfamiliar verbiage, Victor had begun reacting to each new piece of intelligence less like a novice pupil and more in the manner of a devoted seminarian experiencing a long-awaited epiphany. He had smiled serenely, nodding slowly and sagely in rhythm with Prosserman's droning cant, as if the heavens themselves had opened and the light of sweet reason shone down for Victor and for Victor alone.

Until paragraph twenty-three.

Though unaware of it, Prosserman now proceeded in solitude through the complex and interconnected maze of the Vertigo Horse jurisprudential garden. Victor, transfixed, gazed open-mouthed and enraptured at the biggest, most beautiful and sweetest-smelling blossom he had encountered in his thirty-odd years of existence.

Two THOUSAND crowns.

Victor's eyes had continued to play across those three words. Each, in its turn, had seemed to blossom and swell, growing to gargantuan, nearly inconceivable proportions on the page before him.

TWO thousand crowns.

Victor was vaguely aware of the publisher's voice, which had seemed to be coming to him from a great distance. Prosserman stood before a large and complicated flower bed and was just beginning to explain the linkage between that flower bed, the previous flower bed and their joint relationship to the entirety of the Great Garden when The Three Words chose that moment to merge into a unified concept in Victor's mind.

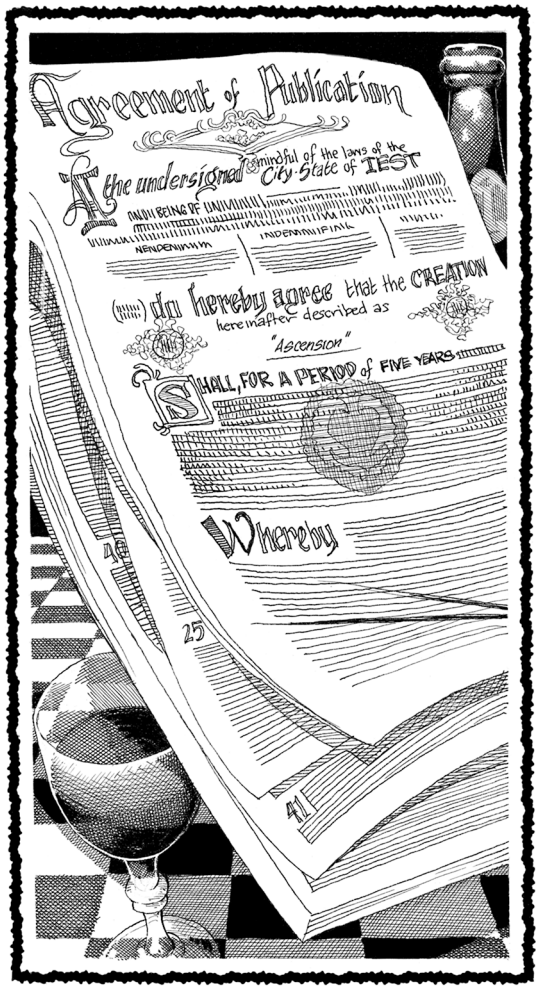
TWO! ... THOUSAND! ... CROWNS!

"When do I get paid?" Victor had blurted out –The Three Words having dashed his carefully crafted thespian demeanour of studious understanding upon the rocks of avaricious urgency.

"Uh. As soon as the contract is signed," Prosserman had answered, taken somewhat aback by the desperate gaze of a very different Victor Reid from the individual who, mere instants before, had been so thoroughly absorbed in the intricacies which governed subsequent printings and their relationship to the reversion clauses. "Naturally, you'll want to consult your solicitor before you..."

Prosserman's thought was unfinished, as Victor had fairly leapt to a nearby writing desk and, having seized a pen, had proceeded to inscribe his signature upon the draught agreement with such ferocity that he had managed to tear a small hole in the paper while dotting the "i" in "Reid".

Victor had then turned upon Prosserman so quickly that the publisher, fearing a physical assault, had instinctively blocked his face with his right forearm. When no blow was struck, Prosserman had lowered his


Agreement of Publication
the undersigned mindful of the laws of the City-State of TEST
(we) do hereby agree that the CREATION hereinafter described as
"Ascension"
SHALL, FOR A PERIOD of FIVE YEARS
Whereby
25
41

arm; and there was Victor, back in his chair, his eyes darting between Prosserman's face and the contract, which now rested on the coffee table between them.

Prosserman had opened his mouth to say something, and closed it...opened his mouth to say something, and closed it.

Sighing, the publisher had withdrawn a small chequebook from his inside pocket and, neatly and carefully, had filled out the particulars. He then handed the cheque to Victor, who had thrust it into his own inside pocket, where he could feel the radiance from it spreading warmth across his chest, ribs and shoulder. Prosserman stood and shook hands with Victor and said that he would send a messenger the next day to arrange for a meeting between Victor and a Vertigo Horse editor.

"Fine," Victor had said, "fine, fine, fine." Victor had then bitten his bottom lip lest the stream of "fines" become a raging torrent of "fines". Four "fines" were quite sufficient. Victor did not wish to seem unprofessionally overeager.

Victor raced from Prosserman's suite to his own room, threw Victoria Reis' name tag into the garbage, hurriedly packed his valise and, summoning the bellman, asked him to arrange for a cab. No, Victor amended, smiling: a carriage. He tipped the bellman a crown outside the front doors of the Regency.

The bellman was still thanking him profusely as the carriage swung smoothly out onto the sweeping boulevard.

I'm rich, thought Victor.

I'm rich, I'm rich, I'M RICH!



Suddenly, it seemed, there were no more Black Days in the life of Victor Reid.

It was as if the entirety of his existence to that point had been an elaborate sham or a not terribly funny practical joke; or, a series of tests of his stamina and perseverance in the face of overwhelming opposition. Having passed this lifelong series of tests, he had (evidently) graduated *magna cum laude* in some ethereal, otherworldly College of Genuine Merit and was now to be rewarded, it seemed, at every turn.

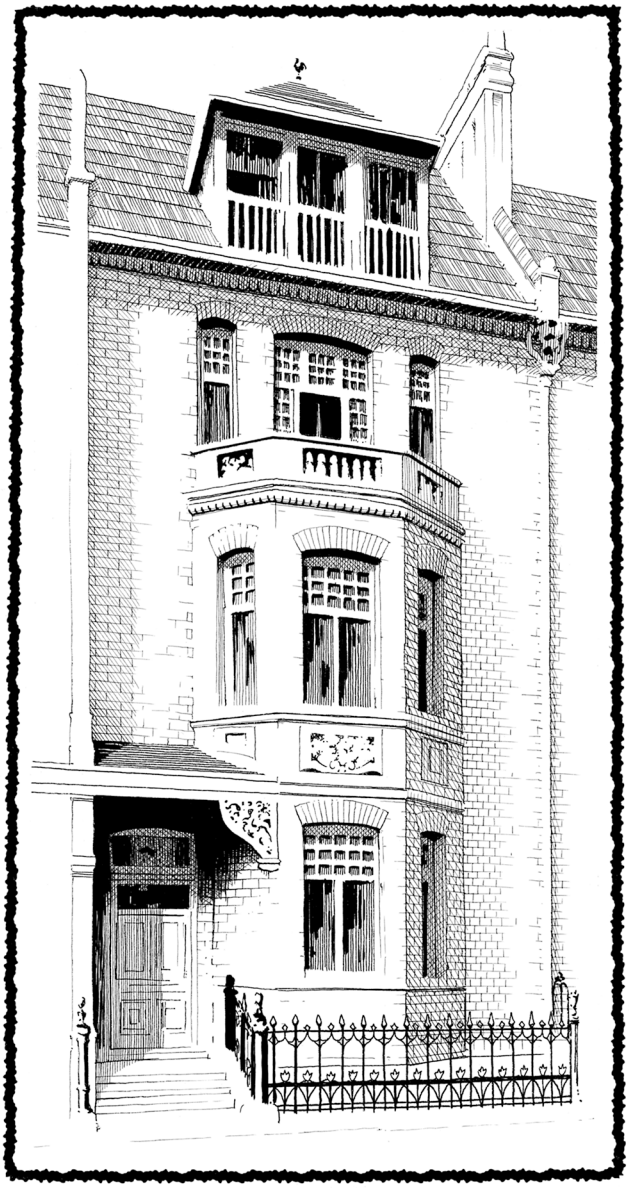
A magnificent townhouse with a spectacular view of the Upper City had come on the market just as Victor had decided to become a homeowner. The current owner was emigrating to the Sepran Empire and had given Victor a ridiculously good price on the house and its contents: antique, hand-woven T'capmin rugs; paintings; sculptures; marble end tables; hand-carved settees; a massive oak dining-room set; a canopied bed which had been owned, previously, by Baskin, the highest-ranking government official in Palnu apart from Lord Julius himself. The inventory list had run to nearly a dozen pages and Mr. Chartwell, himself, at the bank, had volunteered to arrange the terms of Victor's mortgage. While it was true that Victor had to spend the better part of a morning and afternoon saying, "Ah", "mm", and "I see" while signing his name to an inch-high stack of official-looking documents, the entire process had been, in the main, effortless. His account was two hundred and fifty crowns lighter, true, but his monthly payments for the house and contents were a mere twenty-one crowns.

Most nights, Victor would arrive at the *Bull & Finch* and buy a round of drinks for the house. Where once he had been something of a pariah, moodily sipping his cognac in a rear booth, he now found himself the center of a wide circle of close friends, much-admired and well-loved. While it was true that his previous companions were now quite aloof in his presence, Victor soon realized that this reflected simple jealousy on their part over his good fortune. However, this was all for the best, as these former friends would have been (quite naturally) uncomfortable in the company Victor now kept: important, wealthy, interesting people (very much like himself), who were proving invaluable. They helped him to find the "right" tailor, the "right" restaurants, the "right" import grocer and so on. While Victor was a quick study in these areas, finding all of the "right" accoutrements to complement his new station in life had forced him to postpone his meeting several times with his Vertigo Horse editor. It seemed whenever he had set aside the time to begin sifting through his *Ascension* notes, invariably two or more of his new friends would arrive on his doorstep, unannounced, and the rest of the evening would pass into the early morning hours, filled to overflowing with good drink, good food, and important, wealthy and interesting conversation.

At last, with a large twinge of regret, as the deadline for his fourth postponed meeting bore down on him, Victor announced to his would-be visitors that it was "Time to Write". This piece of intelligence being greeted with no little anxiety, vehement protest and many attempted persuasions to the contrary, Victor took as a testament to the solidity of the genuine esteem in which he was now held.



Ascension was to be a ten-part series: Victor's longest work to date. He had the unmistakable impression that Terim herself had taken a hand in guiding his life and that the sixteen years which had brought him to this point had served as a mere prelude to this one



large work. The fortunes of Cirinism and Kevillism had risen and fallen over the previous centuries in regular and reasonably well-documented patterns, but each previous Ascension, or illusory Ascension, had unsettled those patterns. Where Victor had seen this, previously, as a strange quirk in the Iestan histories of the two systems of belief, he had now come to regard the Upper City and its geological peculiarities as more central to the issues at hand than he had previously surmised. His sudden wealth, his attachment to a large and influential publishing concern, his comfortable surroundings, seemed like a nest of sorts; the expanded parameters of the project itself a manifestation of this serendipitous sanctuary. He had not chosen, but had been chosen, to document the history of the war between the Universal Female and the Matriarchal Deity.

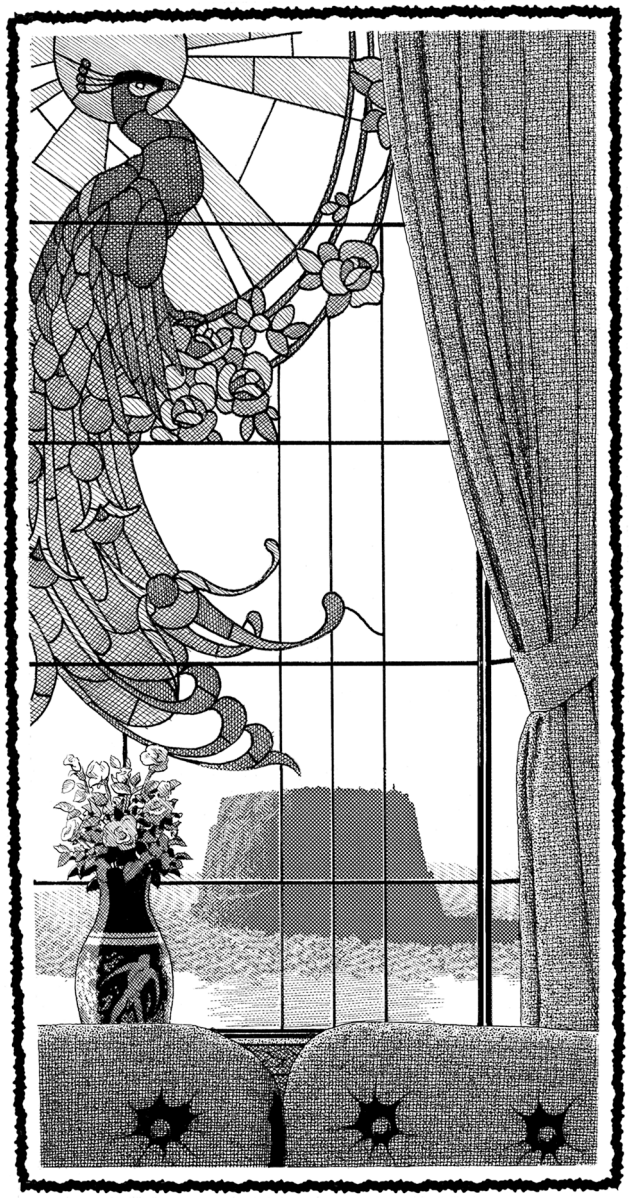
Having documented women (or rather, Woman) for sixteen years, Victor had spent surprisingly little time in their company. Although he had had more than his fair share of sexual "conquests" (most particularly in the immediate aftermath of the breakup of his marriage) and had, intermittently, deluded himself that he was in love, most of these circumstances had played themselves out over a period of weeks or, occasionally, months. Though each woman in his life had claimed to be different, with small similarities, in Victor's experience women were all the same, with minor differences. It was this observation which had first compelled him to write about them, eschewing the misguided chivalry of his contemporaries (whose female characters were, invariably, heroines in every sense of the word: creatures with the physical characteristics of women, but only distantly related to their real-world counterparts) for a more factual and pragmatic portrayal based on observation and commonality.

In the period of weeks that followed the signing of his contract, as Victor postponed, time and again, his first meeting with his Vertigo Horse editor, Milieu had become a frequent visitor to his townhouse. A year younger than himself, she was an acquaintance of many years' standing whom he had first met with his then-wife on an extended promotional tour nearly a decade before. Like the legion of neo-Kevillists who inhabited the incestuous wee world of reads publishing, she took advantage of their infrequent meetings at various social gatherings to engage him in verbal fisticuffs. Neo-Kevillist debate was nothing if not predictable. It began with a challenge (which Victor met easily), continued with rhetorical misdirection (which Victor pointed out), switched to coy flirtation (which Victor pursued or ignored, depending on his inclination), slowed to whining protest or sullen repetition (which Victor demolished in the case of the former and countered in the latter), and ground to a halt in aggrieved petulance (which was Victor's signal to get another cognac). Almost ten years to the day of their first meeting, Victor had found himself in Milieu's company once more. They were both divorced and she, having run the aforementioned course in neo-Kevillist rhetorical reflex in the first hour (which was always interspersed with compliments on Victor's abilities as a writer – a futile attempt at disarmament), had actually, in uncharacteristic fashion, begun to listen to what he had to say.

She had, after a time, volunteered her services as an unpaid research assistant on *Ascension*. The price being right, Victor had agreed and soon Victor's second-floor study (which had a magnificent view of the Upper City from across the Feld River, a large bay window with leaded glass, a curved window-seat with maroon velvet cushions and hand-carved, interwoven, vine leaves in the mahogany wainscoting) began filling up with every available account of the previous Ascensions, cross-referenced with corresponding histories of Cirinism, Kevillism and their attendant predecessors. heresies and factions. She stayed late many nights, discussing her latest finds and noting suggestions for other documentation and where it might be found – she drinking blush wine (Pink Infidel, which Victor now ordered by the case) and he drinking cognac. Their discussions would often veer from *Ascension* to the lives of various authors, illustrators, editors and publishers of their mutual acquaintance. This was an element of female nature which Victor now saw that he had missed in his more distanced observation. Gossip, which had never interested him, now began to dominate his thoughts even as he was attempting to focus on *Ascension*.

It wasn't the gossip, *per se*, that interested him. Victor had long ago come to the conclusion that every human being (Victor included) had a closet which contained a few – and, more often than not, several – skeletons. These, like women, tended to be tedious in their similarity and, apart from slight gradations in the colouring of their lurid details, uninteresting in the extreme. Alcoholism, drug addiction, pedophilia, prostitution, gambling, homosexuality, bisexuality, infidelity and cuckoldry (which Victor referred to as Mr. and Mrs. Infidelity); the only thing which would have surprised Victor would be verification that anyone of his acquaintance had had no experience with one or more of these, in either thought, deed or both.

The Gossip Book (or *Côte d'Azur*, as it was now known) had had its genesis in these conversations with Milieu. She had told him one night about a prominent editor who had become pregnant by her husband and who had chosen to have an abortion rather than bear the child. Victor was aware that there were more than enough avenues in modern Estarcion for terminating a pregnancy and, though hardly commonplace, such things were scarcely the stuff of scandal. The



difference in this case was that the woman in question had decided to forgo the traditional visit to one of the well-known Kevillist bastions (where like-minded ideologues cheerfully performed the service in question) and had, instead, permitted her daughter and a few of her medical student friends to perform the necessary ministrations.

Victor, after Milieu had left, had jotted the pertinent details into his notebook and had sat contemplating the words long into the night. He had then jotted down the details of another story about a Kevillist illustrator of his acquaintance who seemed not to be able to set foot outside her door without becoming the victim of unwanted and pressing sexual advances, but who had drawn a caricature of herself for Victor (some years before she became a vocal authority on the subject), which she had inscribed, "I looked on the loss of my virginity as a career move." Gossip. Reality and portrayal. "Everyone is normal until you get to know them," he had noted at the bottom of the page.

After several days of contemplation, as *Ascension* sat untouched and Milieu's research materials piled up around him, Victor had come to a slow realisation about the theme which bound these stories together. These episodes (and the others he had jotted down) expressed a spirit of excess which was inherent in Kevillist doctrine.

"Choice above all" was a signpost on the road to madness.

During one of their late-night conversations, he had broached the subject of *Côte d'Azur* to Milieu. He had discussed the possible implications with her and had outlined, briefly, the short story upon which it was based, to which he would be paying indirect *homage*: *La Côte Basque*. The author had been a favourite of Victor's, though the story wasn't one of his best. Apart from evening a few scores and long-held grudges, the descriptions had been too precise, leaving no doubt as to the identity of their real-life counterparts; the incidents recounted had been exaggerated for literary effect, taking the story out of the realm of literature and fact-based gossip and into the outer reaches of distortion and outright falsehood. After publication, one of the principal figures in the story had committed suicide. The author himself had been ostracized by Privileged Society for violating the confidences of a few of its members. He had died a few years later; a hopeless alcoholic, alone, unmourned and unloved.

"You're insane," she had said after exhaling a thin stream of cigarette smoke. She had grown thoughtful then and for several silent moments Victor had tried, without success, to read her thoughts in her inscrutable features.

"Leave me and my family out of it," she concluded, and, they had returned to discussing *Ascension*.

Thereafter, Milieu became more cautious, for a time, about telling Victor *anything*. New information about her family dried up like a rain puddle on a sunny afternoon (which was an unexpected benefit; Victor had always found women excessive when it came to the subject of their blood relations, usually to the exclusion of any subject of genuine or general interest). From time to time, she would greet him with a cheery "Hey, I think I have a story for your read," but even the best of these had a numbing and pointless sameness about them. An illustrator who was intending to reveal his bisexuality, who was employed by a publishing company known to be strictly homophobic (a neo-Kevillist term of recent vintage); a prominent retailer who had been carrying on an illicit affair for some years; another friend who had revealed herself as a lesbian and who was now happily and traditionally married.

So, Victor tried gossip himself.

He began having more conversations with women at convocations and signings. He had a sixteen-year inventory of little-known facts and unsubstantiated rumours about many authors and illustrators of his acquaintance and found that, in this strange new world, this represented a comparable kind of wealth to that which his advance payment for *Ascension* represented in the material world.

"Gossip cleaves," he had written in his notebook one night.

In both senses of the word, gossip brought women together and gossip tore them apart from one another. Previously, he would hear an unpleasant story about a woman from an ostensible friend of hers and merely think it odd. Now he would trade a tidbit for a tidbit and found, to his surprise, that he was soon locked in earnest conversation with someone who was a complete stranger, or, at best a casual acquaintance. The laying bare of the private life of another created an illusion of intimacy in some strange female manner. The sharing of another's confidences became a peculiar sort of binding mechanism. Certain forms had to be observed. "I'm not supposed to tell anyone this" or the more disingenuous "I've never told anyone this" were the *pro forma* salutations. The conversation had to be punctuated with disclaimers: "Don't get me wrong. I really love Mrs. Such and So, I think the world of her, but...".

The specific confidences went in one of Victor's ears and beat a hasty retreat out of the other. But he found the experience to be compelling in the extreme. What gossip brought together, gossip would, inevitably, rend



asunder. A good story would spread like wildfire and the compulsive gossip soon found herself (or himself — until he got the hang of it, Victor found himself the victim of many a frosty stare from unexpected quarters) caught in the backdraft. Very often, the correspondent assumed greater importance than the gossip itself. "Who told you that?" was not a question to be taken lightly. Within female ranks, selective and opportune amnesia was widespread to the point of being endemic. Victor began to understand more fully why it was that two women who had been fast friends at one dinner party could appear to be mortal enemies at the next.

Gossip, he speculated, had its origins in traditional matriarchal society, where it functioned as a self-policing instrument. There was a distinct and inviolable set of rules which governed the behaviour of the Good Wife and Mother. Any behaviour which fell outside of these clearly defined guidelines, any thought or deed which was not explicitly sanctioned, was implicitly forbidden. The deeply ingrained urge towards shared confidence as a prerequisite (and most often the substance) of female intimacy ensured that transgressors were soon found out. Their sordid confession to a trusted friend soon became universal female knowledge; thus, ostracism and disgrace soon followed. The Bad Wife and Mother was "made an example of," her subsequent unhappy and isolated existence serving as a warning and a deterrent to those likewise tempted and a living testimony to the immaculate purity of the maternal society which had cleansed itself of these malignancies. Though the remaining society was doubtless riddled with transgressors, the example also served to make them see the wisdom in keeping their transgressions to themselves; their fear of discovery and the burden of guilt (without any possibility of confession or release) serving as suitable punishment. Illusion, thus reinforced, became reality.

Kevillism had divided women's minds into warring factions. Choice, obviously, implied choosing. What purpose could there be in living in a world which was a smorgasbord of options if one didn't at least sample those alternatives which one found personally attractive? There yet existed (and exists) a need for intimacy between and among females, an urge toward collective interest and collective awareness. Kevillism had served to fracture that interest and that awareness into many interests and awareness in multiple ways. This Kevillist faction might deplore divorce and advocate infidelity; another might deplore infidelity and advocate sequential marriages; still another might deny infidelity as an outmoded concept and advocate many simultaneous relationships. Some advocated lesbianism exclusively, some bisexuality, some heterosexuality exclusively.

Victor knew of one Kevillist who had been ostracized from a group which deplored simultaneous relationships (bisexual or lesbian), who found herself a kindred spirit of a group which advocated bisexual simultaneous relationships, only to be cast out along with her lesbian partner when they chose to become faithful and exclusive life-mates. Whereupon she was left high and dry when her faithful and exclusive life-mate, exercising her own absolute freedom of choice, chose to become a respectable and traditional wife and mother.

In short, Kevillism and its credo of "choice above all" had, by implication, made any working definition of it impossible. The single ideology that bound Kevillists together ensured that Kevillism itself could not exist except as fragmented, amorphous, ever-changing subgroups consisting of no more than a handful of individuals. Each time these individuals made another choice (and since choice was the thing — the only thing — which defined a Kevillist, the temptation to make new choices was irresistible), they were ostracized by one subgroup and absorbed by another.

As Victor contemplated this conclusion, he was struck by the fact that, structurally, this was the most effective and natural means of developing an underground political cell system — which was the very foundation of Astoria's revolutionary politics. As the individual cells purified themselves (ostracism), they multiplied and became more efficient. Perhaps efficient wasn't the word, but they certainly became more infectious, more virulent.

"Choice above all."

"Gossip cleaves."

Victor pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and dipped his quill. Perhaps *Côte d'Azur* wasn't a separate work at all.

Perhaps it was the thematic core of *Ascension* that had been eluding him.



A few days later, Victor sat thumbing through a clean copy of the finished installment. He had not been to the *Bull & Finch* since the wonderful moment when he had decided to incorporate *Côte d'Azur* into *Ascension*. He had slept only four hours a night (this was always the surest sign that his writing was going well; when things were going badly he would sleep anywhere from nine to twelve hours), snacking intermittently on bread and cheese that he picked up at the corner grocer's every other day.

The chapter ran to a little over thirty pages in Milieu's distinctive, looping and decorative script (in



addition to the research she did, she was also a consummate proofreader; in restaurants she would scan the menu for typographical errors and then, only as an afterthought, for a potential meal). He considered offering again to pay her for her services. Judging by their recurrence in his first drafts, a rate based upon misplaced semi-colons and hyphens might prove extremely lucrative. She seemed content, however, with original printings of his earlier works, which he kept in scrupulous disorder in a cabinet in his library (the library itself was formerly a kitchen; Victor intended a complete remodeling at some future date, having accomplished the important task of performing a counter-, sink- and stove-ectomy as sacrificial homage to the Gods of Anti-domesticity), and with serving as a kind of ideological scratching post when overindulgence in the depths of fermented waters brought forth the misogynistic claws of Rotsieve (the anti-Victor). On a handful of occasions, she even prepared small meals for the two of them, which Victor grimly regarded as infinitely better than the overpriced fare which was served in the "right" restaurants. She had arrived one day to find the larder purged of her gastronomic infiltrators and Victor hard at work, a small plate of bread slices and flavourless cheese within his reach. She had made no inquiry and, consequently, Victor proffered no explanation.

Now that the critical chapter had been accomplished and the rough outline (which ran to several pages) had been modified to accommodate it, Victor felt no need to postpone his meeting with the Vertigo Horse editor a fifth time. There was apt to be some problem with the fact that the completed installment, *Côte d'Azur*, was actually the fourth (or more likely the fifth or sixth) in the proposed series, which meant that he would definitely miss the now-extended deadline for delivery of the first part. He was certain (or, at least, he hoped) that, once he was able to explain that the earlier chapters would now be little more than an exercise in construction and foreshadowing, his new publisher would see that everything would unfold smoothly and efficiently from this juncture forward.

The research material sat in a neat stack on his writing desk, all pertinent pages flagged and germane passages underscored. The picture in his mind of his central characters, based on his aunt and his maternal grandmother, was vivid and sharply delineated. He would even use their real names, Elsie and Lillian, with the early chapters taking place in their infancy and childhood; their upbringing would be interwoven with fables and legends which had their origin in the myriad *Ascension*s which had taken place or which were reputed to have occurred in antiquated times.

He very much looked forward to the jarring transition he intended between the fourth and sixth chapters (his intended central characters having vanished for the entirety of the fifth), At the conclusion of the fourth episode, Elsie and Lillian were just beginning their schooling at the age of five or six. The fifth installment was *Côte d'Azur* (or perhaps, with a little fleshing out, the last few pages of the fourth, the entirety of the fifth and the first few pages of the sixth). Two new characters (evidently) appear early in the sixth, two women in their dotage, reminiscing about their lives. It is only in the last few pages of the sixth episode (or perhaps the first few pages of the seventh) that a recollection, a shared recollection, of an incident from their earliest childhood reveals them as the wayward Elsie and Lillian. The intervening years (some thirty or forty) would be filled in as they engage in far-ranging conversations centered upon the dramatic changes Kevillism had brought about in their lifetime. Lillian would regret all of the choices and possibilities she had bypassed in choosing to become a traditional wife and mother and, living vicariously through her Kevillist daughters and granddaughters, would be an uncritical proponent of Astoria's quiet revolution. Elsie, who had taken full advantage of the emergent possibilities at various critical junctures in her adulthood, would feel that these had, ultimately, made her existence an unhappy one and, thus, would deplore what she regarded as the endless worsening in the quality of female lives. Lillian would make the undiplomatic observation that it was Elsie's failure and not the failure of Kevillism itself which had led to her unhappiness. This would bring about an irreparable schism between the two and the final chapter would consist of the two of them in respective solitude contemplating their imminent deaths and reflecting upon Astoria herself for the first time. The question implicit in the second half would be: "Has Kevillism brought about an improvement or a worsening in female lives?" The answer, of necessity and in keeping with all of Victor's previous works, would be ambiguous, with the author himself arguing vociferously and (he hoped) convincingly both the "yea" and the "nay" through his characters.

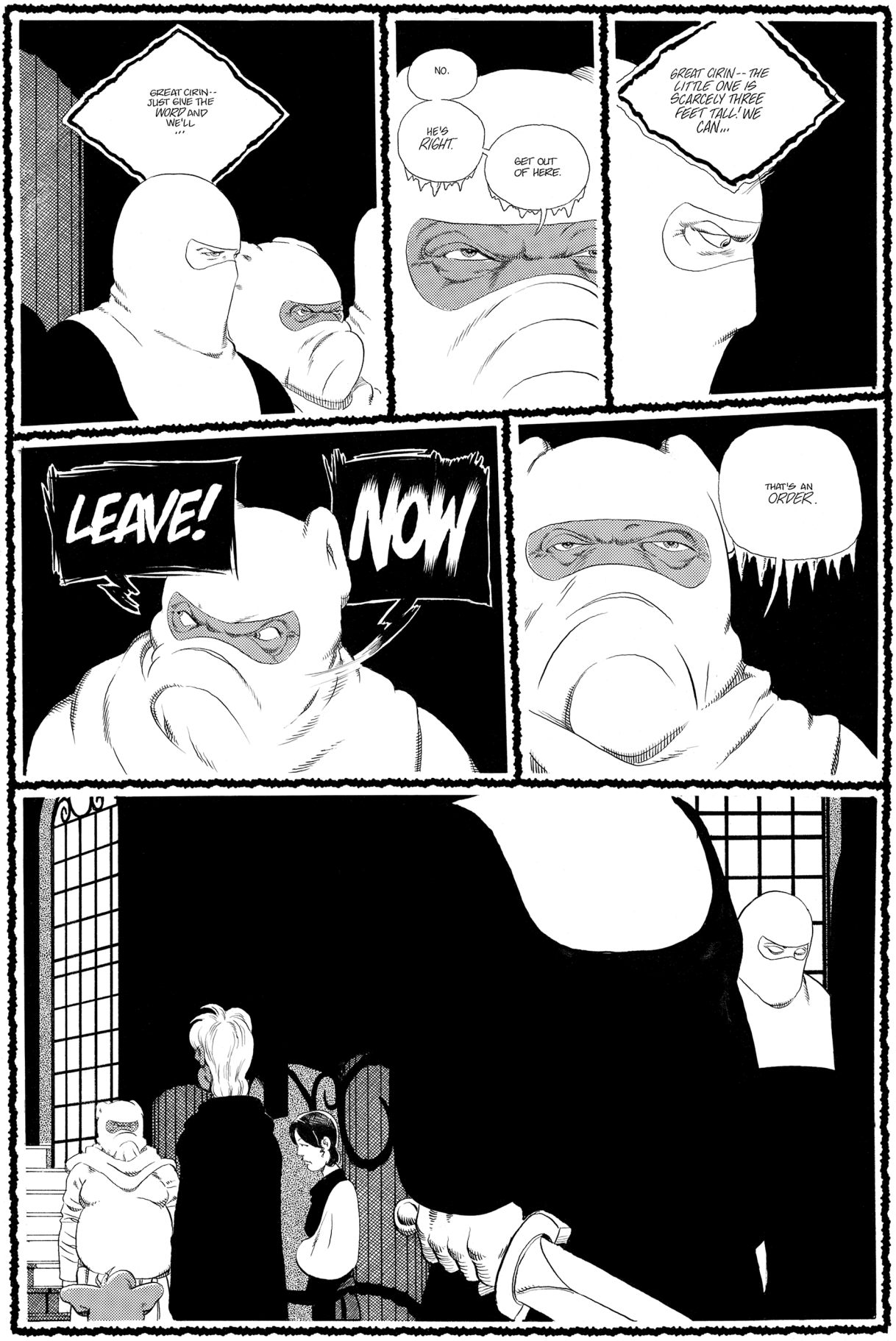
He jotted the words "yea" and "nay" on a fresh page in his notebook. After a moment, he wrote "why hierophant-magician" beside the former and "not magician, why" adjacent to the latter. After a short internal dialogue, he wrote "chapter seven" above them, and then added a small question mark after the chapter number.

He slid a small stack of notes on various scraps of paper into the pouch affixed to the inside front cover and then closed the notebook, placing it atop the pile of research materials.

Yes, things were going well.

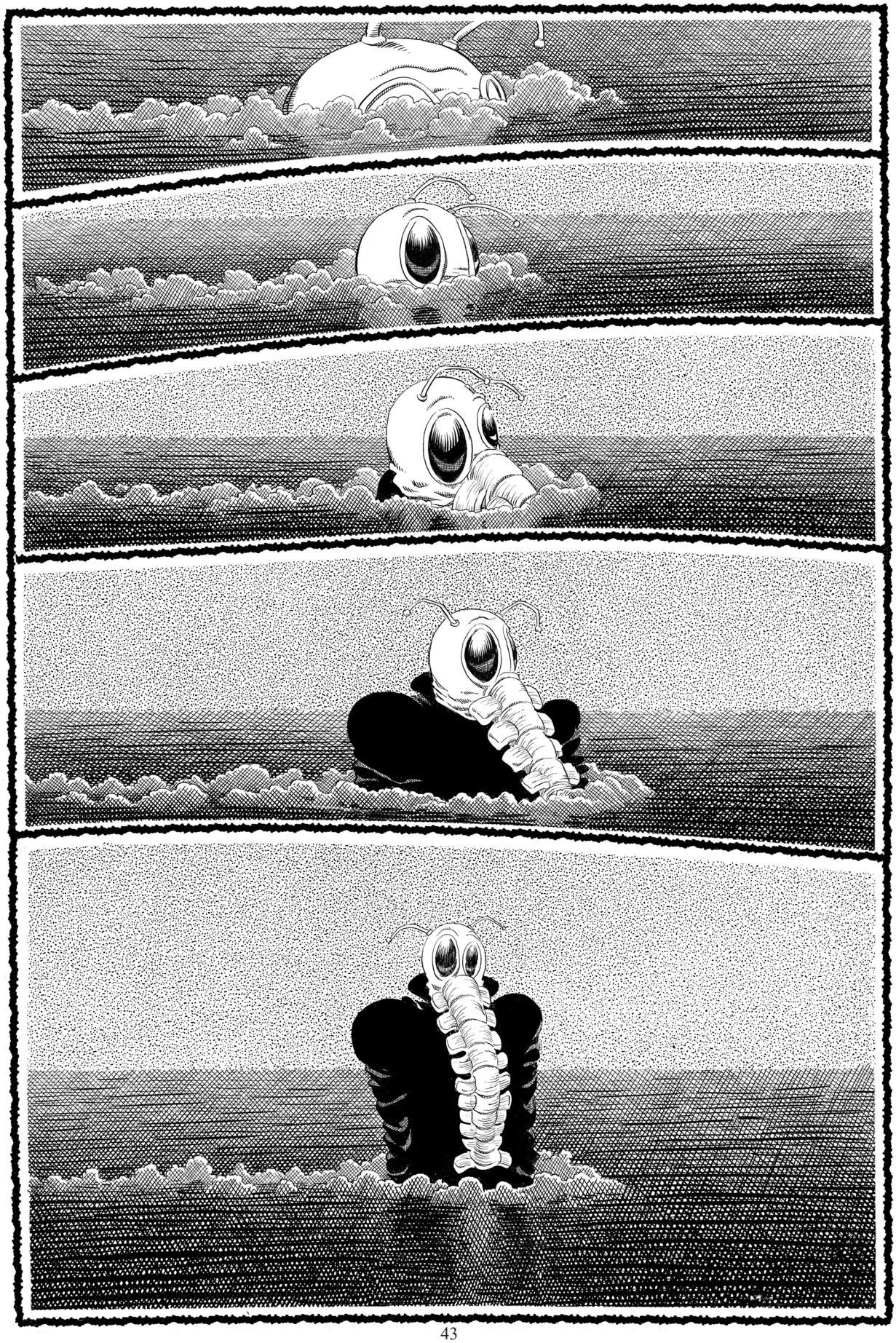
Things were going very well indeed.




GREAT CIRIN-- JUST GIVE THE WORD AND WE'LL ...
NO.
HE'S RIGHT.
GET OUT OF HERE.
GREAT CIRIN-- THE LITTLE ONE IS SCARCELY THREE FEET TALL! WE CAN...
LEAVE!
NOW
THAT'S AN ORDER.


'AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR'...
YES.
'AND THEN THERE WERE FOUR'
A MALE NUMBER
THE NUMBER OF THE EMPEROR
THE KING.
SOON... THERE WILL BE THREE... A FEMALE NUMBER. THE NUMBER OF THE EMPRESS.
THE QUEEN
THE NUMBER OF...
CHANGE


ASTORIA.
CIRIN.
YOU WOULD DO WELL TO CONSIDER *THIS*: OF THE *THREE* OF YOU, OUR YOUNG FRIEND HERE
IS THE ONLY ONE WHOSE CLAIM TO THE PAPAL THRONE DOES NOT ORIGINATE IN BLOODSHED...
YOU HAVE BOTH *UNDERESTIMATED* HIM AT EVERY TURN...
YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS HIM REMAINS *PATRONIZING*...
ARROGANT.
YOU ARE AT HIS *MERCY*, NOW. IF YOU ARE NOT *WISE* ENOUGH TO *RECOGNIZE* THAT FACT...
IT WILL SURELY COST YOU YOUR LIVES...
YOU ARE WOMEN. CUNNING... DECEIT... TREACHERY... MANIPULATION ...GUILE... THESE ARE YOUR STOCK-IN-TRADE.
BUT, THEY MAKE A POOR *SHIELD* AGAINST A *HARD BLADE* AND A MURDEROUS IMPULSE.




THE GAME IS NOW CEREBUS'S-- AS THEY SAY-- TO WIN OR LOSE...
AND YOU, PO?
WHAT IS YOUR GAME?
BALANCE?...
I PREVENTED --OR, PERHAPS, MERELY DELAYED...
ASTORIA'S EXECUTION.
I HAVE BROUGHT THE THREE OF YOU TOGETHER...
WHY.


CAPTOR AND CAPTURED
ACCUSER AND ACCUSED
EXECUTIONER AND EXECUTED.
TO BREAK THE CYCLE ASTORIA ...
LOOK.
THE THRONE IS EMPTY.
BLASPHEMY
SORCERY
WHAT IS TRUTH?
ECHOES.
ECHOES, ASTORIA.
THEY CAN'T HURT YOU.


ECHOES, PO?
ILLUSIONS, YOU MEAN.
I HAVE ADDRESSED YOUR PREJUDICES ALREADY...
AT MY INVITATION YOU HAVE READ MY MIND--MY HISTORY
YOU HAVE FOUND CHESS THERE
AND NOTHING...
NOTHING
...BESIDES
IF YOU HAVE ANYTHING MEANINGFUL TO CONTRIBUTE
DO SO...
IF NOT THEN BE SILENT
WHERE WAS I? "
CEREBUS HAS THEM BOTH AT HIS MERCY.
AH!





ictor Reid awoke, his throat parched and waves of pain rolling listlessly through the interior of his skull, dashing themselves against the craggy shoreline behind his eyes, a tidal phenomenon which seemed in some way connected to the gravitational force exerted by the leaden mass which had replaced his stomach in the night. One eyelid slid warily aloft against the resistant and vaguely adhesive film which coated its throbbing underside. Some inches away sat

one of Victor's wineglasses, faint lip prints visible at the rim, half-filled with pinkish, translucent wine in which floated a single cigarette end, its paper filter captured in the process of unravelling, weeping tobacco-coloured tendrils which curled comfortably into a slightly darker and malignant pool at the point where the stem of the glass met its bowl.

Milieu's.

A single image of Milieu's face, soft and inscrutable, swam before him, tears starting down her cheeks, even as her lips parted and a shuddering intake of breath signaled...

As if to emphasize his recollection, a part of the blackened end of the cigarette detached itself and drifted languidly downward through the stagnant pool of Pink Infidel, jostling the sickly yellow tendrils and causing them to adopt newer and (as if such a thing were possible) even uglier formations.

Raising himself up on one elbow, he attempted to familiarize himself with his surroundings. After a slow, bleary-eyed assessment of the furnishings in his immediate vicinity, he concluded that he had fallen asleep on the sofa in his living room. His new wine-coloured velvet jacket (*du Remarque* of Lower Felda) was still buttoned over his silk waistcoat (*Renard* of Serrea) and his crisp white cotton shirt (*Palais de Dieu*). His gold-and-red silk tie (*Holcombe and Sons*, Iest) retained Victor's distinctive Unshib Knot. There was a dull ache at the top of his breastbone where his ruby stickpin (*Garland Brothers*, Iest) had very nearly broken through the skin as he slept. From the waist down, he was nude.

The white notebook.

His heart leapt within him. Had that really all just happened yesterday? His stomach lurched at the impertinence of the unexpected pulmonary response which, in its turn, provoked a painful escalation of the tidal activity in his brain. Even as the timpani players in his eardrums took this as a signal to exert themselves *a fortissimo* and translucent curtains of red gauze swam across his vision, Victor reached for the small notebook with trembling hands and began flipping through it. Yes. It was all here. Some part of him felt inexplicable relief at this; it was as if he knew he deserved punishment for his half-remembered behaviour of the previous evening (what was it young Justine had called it? Chemical remorse.). And yet the notebook was still here, filled with Milieu's distinctive, looping characters. Had Victor been Tarim or Terim, the book would have vanished like a bad dream upon awakening. Standing too quickly, he barked his shin against the sharp corner of the mahogany coffee table. His shouted expletive introduced a new player to his orchestra; a large brass gong many feet in diameter struck with an unpadded hammer. He limped painfully in the direction of the bathroom in time with his newly expanded percussion section.



As he poured boiling water into the bath he had drawn for himself, his conscious mind began the ignominious task of attempting to prod and pierce the thin membrane which partitioned yesterday's activities from his memory. Past experience told Victor that he could expect only fragmentary rewards for his trouble, beginning with his last sequentially uninterrupted recollection and pressing on from there through bog, swamp and bramble until he reached the point where impenetrable jungle would block any further progress.

Why was it, Victor wondered, as he eased himself into the bath, the steaming waters rising to the level of his chin (a signal for the timpani players to redouble their efforts), why was it that he always...*did* this to himself just when he was the most exhilarated by his life and his work. He regarded his belly, which rose from the gently lolling waters, his navel at its geographic center, like some flesh-coloured and extinct volcano. He remembered when it had been a mere atoll. Of late it had grown to be a South Sea island of considerable size, capable of sustaining, Victor imagined, a population of some hundreds of natives with his extinct volcano/navel as a tourist attraction, rising majestically on the horizon and visible from many miles in all directions. Soon, if Victor did not mend his gourmand ways, he would have a full-blown island republic to contend with. Angry red striations bisected the southernmost facing of the tourist attraction in question with the distinctive pattern of his wide leather belt (*Holcombe and Sons*, Iest), although even these were beginning to vanish from his sight over the rising promontory. He scratched listlessly at them, and the burgeoning island republic swayed in response, like a large dog being scratched behind the ear.

Victor closed his eyes.

Cerebus had ascended.





Milieu had arrived, mid-afternoon, breathless, her eyes gleaming. His housekeeper (Victor winced as he recalled that this was her day off. What if she had walked in and found him...found him...) had admitted her, and she had flown up the stairs, waving the white notebook and laughing like a madwoman. When she had managed to catch her breath, she had related a chance meeting in a pub the previous night. A friend of a friend had introduced her to a certain Mr. Bruno, an enthusiast of *camera obscura*, lenscrafting and the related fields. It seemed that Mr. Bruno, on the night that the "illusion tower" had grown (a year before? two?) to a height never previously recorded, had been experimenting with a tube he had devised of lenses arranged in sequence (a tube he was at great pains to keep secret from the Church, for such contrivances had led more than one of his fellow aficionados to be excommunicated...and worse). The function of these lenses was to bring objects closer to the observer, through magnification, much in the way that the *camera obscura* projects a distant image onto a white surface. On the night in question, Mr. Bruno had been observing the moon through this tube of his and had been surprised to notice that some large object had interposed itself, which at first he had supposed to be a branch or a tree trunk of some kind. Having determined that that was not the case, he had been amazed to note that the object was composed of carved faces or heads and, further, was receding from view at a perfectly astonishing speed. It grew smaller and smaller, becoming little more than an oblong shape against the face of the celestial body, then a mere speck and, finally, vanished from view altogether. It was not until word of the vanishing "illusion tower" had reached him some months later that he made the connection between the two dates (carefully checking even the time of day in a logbook of his observations). He had invited Milieu to his apartments to look through the tube herself, and she assured Victor that the device worked precisely in the manner described. She had transcribed the entirety of her conversation with Mr. Bruno into her white notebook and, having promised his real name would not be divulged, had extracted his permission (in writing!) to include his observations in Victor's book.

Victor had been stunned.

When at last he recovered his powers of speech, he had babbled for some time about the implications of this piece of intelligence, in a series of disconnected sentences which stumbled and bounced in, over and around each other like so many puppies negotiating a playground slide. Through it all Milieu perched on the edge of her chair, grinning and laughing, her head bobbing so enthusiastically that her long blonde hair leapt and danced about her head and shoulders like a separate being entirely. And then they were both on their feet, their hands clasped, whirling in a circle like schoolchildren, their hysterical laughter and shouts attracting the attentions of Victor's housekeeper, who warily poked her head around the corner of the study's doorway, whereupon she too had been swept up into the merry dance, laughing through the sheer infectious joy of it all (but inwardly mindful of her mother's words regarding her employer that she should exercise great caution and watchfulness because "all writers are insane. At the first sign of mischief, run away as fast as you can and don't look back.").

At last, the hilarity had subsided and Victor had scrawled a note to Karen Potts, the Vertigo Horse editor who had been assigned to him, begging her forgiveness but postponing their first meeting yet again, this time because of a breakthrough in his research, which Victor was certain (and here he smiled as he wrote) would make *Ascension* the best-selling series of reads in the history of the medium. He pictured the stir that such an assertion was sure to create in the Vertigo Horse offices as he bade his housekeeper to summon a messenger.

He and Milieu sat beaming at one another, and Victor ventured the opinion that there was really nothing for it, was there, but that they go somewhere to celebrate. "*Comme tu veux*," Milieu had replied, and Victor told her to go home and put on her best dress. After she left, Victor began sorting through the assortment of fashionable and expensive clothing he had acquired in recent weeks, merrily humming and singing several of his favourite songs.



L'Hermitage it was called.

A restaurant trafficking exclusively in Feldan *Provençal cuisine*, Victor had seen mention of it in one of the better restaurant guides and had noted that the owner/chef was a former chef to the monarch of one of the smaller T'Capmin Kingdoms. The decor was perfunctory at best, which had served to dampen Victor's mood, slightly, on their arrival. The food, however, was exquisite. Victor ordered a bottle of very expensive Feldan champagne and toasted, as was his habit, "to crime". He chattered amiably on every subject under the sun, poured forth a litany of his plans and dreams and aspirations. Mr. Bruno was the key he had been looking for. With the revelation implied by this small piece of research, Victor had in his grasp the leverage he needed to fulfill his longest held and most secret hope: he would publish a read which contained no illustrations. None. He waxed poetic on the subject. It was time for literature to mature beyond pictures and stand or fall on its own merits. Illustrations were just confusing; they seldom, if ever, pertained to the text and divided the reader's attentions, inhibiting



their inner vision. Without pictures, *Ascension* would be the first vehicle in the history of the reads medium that would allow the writer to involve his audience in the story alone. Without a pictorial crutch, the reader would involve himself more fully in the story, lose his preconceptions as to the content and give himself (or herself, Victor added in the politically correct manner) to the writer's control. Oh, yes, Victor would weave tapestries with his words, his description of the tower breaking off from its base in a thundering and explosive convulsion, hurling itself skyward, into the heavens, bearing the diminutive figure of the tiny populist Pope aloft, there to rendezvous with the Living Goddess, would be. . .

Or God, he thought.

Victor had paused, then. A sudden feeling of uncertainty overtook him, familiar territory for a writer. He gazed at the tabletop — as if it were an uncompleted paragraph — for several moments. The waiter reappeared, and Victor ordered another bottle of champagne.

Milieu asked him about his family, cautiously. She had broached the topic several times before and had noted that on each occasion the subject had abruptly changed his disposition (Milieu was the first of the many women in Victor's life to tell him that his eyes changed colour in response to his mood; it was an observation he found unsettling). Now, however, in light of the enormous success he felt looming before him, no subject could take the wind out of his sails. Not tonight. And so he answered all of her questions about his father; his mother and his sister; his aunt and uncle, who were childless; his other aunt and uncle, and his female cousin (the only member of the family who was younger than Victor); his grandmother, confined to a nursing home; his other grandmother (recently widowed); his great aunt, who deplored his status as an unrepentant divorcé at peace with his solitary existence (who, Victor told Milieu, had turned to him at one memorable Winter's Eve Holiday and had said, venomously, "so, you're a free man." "Well," Victor had replied, "I'm not free, but I'm reasonable."). With the exception of his cousin, Tracy, Victor was the baby of the family and the clown, two roles which he found more and more confining as the years went by.

They had no interest in his work. The few relations who had attempted to read him had found his work impenetrable and their lack of comprehension frustrating. His recent financial success had simply imposed another barrier, which was to be expected, Victor supposed. His sister, an ardent Kevillist, was caught between ferocious competitiveness with him and a woman's natural desire to be close to her relations. She had accused Victor of "talking too much" some years before, and so, now, in her infrequent company, Victor held his tongue and contented himself with listening to her ceaseless monologues on the subject of her trials, tribulations and triumphs in a male-dominated world.

Mercifully, at that point, the waiter brought the main course, and Milieu filed her conversational trophies away in the treasured recesses of the female mind where such things are kept.

Victor now endeavoured to converse in Lower Feldan. It was a language he could read to a very small degree, write even less well and understand, in conversation, not at all. Or so he supposed. Milieu confined herself to simple, declarative sentences, and as the evening went on Victor found himself remembering a good deal more of his Feldan *de l'ecole* than he had imagined possible.

"Where had it gone wrong?" he wondered, ducking his head below the surface of his bath.

He had ordered a third bottle of champagne. Yes. It was at that point that the undergrowth of inebriation began to grow wild, stifling, choking off rational thought. Still, everything had been splendid. They had had a *soufflé* for dessert, which had been a little too brown around the edges. Not quite overcooked but sufficient to make it pastry-like instead of "air and eggs, devoid of texture" (who was it that said that? Victor forgot). And as they were finishing the champagne, a small savoury arrived, compliments of the management, containing the season's first raspberries. He didn't remember leaving *L'Hermitage*. He had been in a romantic mood — or lustful, anyway, which was Victor's nearest approximation of romance since the third debacle with Justine. Milieu understood the rules. Sex, conversation and companionship were the only cards he threw in the game of romance these days. "Everything with you is just foreplay," Kallin had said to him once, long ago. If his Final Rest was in a cemetery of female devising, he could think of no more suitable an epitaph for his headstone: "Here lies Victor Reid. Everything to him was just foreplay."

Karen Potts' note.

He started up so violently that a great deal of bathwater hurled itself onto the turquoise tiles. His heart pounded; the waters reared back against him and then retreated, reared against him and retreated. The pendulum-like contest between kinetic and potential energy exhausted itself gradually, and then all was sufficiently still that the sound of water dripping from his forelocks seemed to echo loudly in the small room. Karen Potts' note.

Through the dark and overgrown vines of alcohol-assisted amnesia it swam up towards him. He fought the urge to leap from the bath in pursuit of it. It would still be crumpled into a small ball in the corner, next to the



marble statue of the Goddess, in her Lady of Bounty aspect (the irony was not lost on Victor as he recalled this). But there was no need. The hated words burned like fire in the forefront of his mind. As he closed his eyes and eased himself back into his bath, he could see them as clearly as if they had been written across the sky in vermillion...no, scarlet...letters.

Victor:

Impossible to reschedule. Please be here by mid-afternoon or remit advance payment in full by return post.

Sincerely, Mrs. Potts

He felt the rage well up in him again. The rage, fueled by a prodigious quantity of alcohol. He had poured himself a large cognac on their arrival and a Pink Infidel for Milieu. They had been chatting amiably when he had spotted the pink (pink!) envelope on the small table in the entryway. He had torn open the envelope and read the note through blurred vision. And the rage had come upon him.

Enter Rotsieve, the anti-Victor.

He couldn't remember a thing of what he had said, of course, but he could guess. Rotsieve and Victor were two sides of the same coin. Victor studied Kevillism and Cirinism, accommodating himself to the new reality of female ascendancy in its dual (contradictory) forms and delighting in weaving fictions which punctured the pretensions of the "unfairer sex" (*Lady Hortense's Conundrum*, Victor Reid, Shadow Press, 1407) and which played hob with their ill-considered rhetoric and platitudinous mumbo jumbo. There were women of good intellect with whom he enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of forensic debate on the subject (Milieu was one). Most of these had become aware, in recent days and to varying degrees, that the homogenization of gender was not the land of milk and honey that it was purported to be. Men had become weak and pliant to the point of flaccidity, sycophantic in their adoration. Few were the women of Victor's acquaintance the paths of whose young lives were not strewn with the wreckage and debris of male hearts relentlessly thrown over the transom at the locked door of their kind indifference. As it became apparent to good women with good minds that much of this trouble must (in no small measure) be debited to the hitherto undebited account of Kevillist infallibility, Victor had become more sympathetic to the female plight. He documented, now, their genuine anxiety and turned a deaf ear to the earnest nonsense of the prattling rhetoric mongers in the same way that he took no serious notice of Feldwar Supremacists or Sepra First ideologues.

Rotsieve, as the saying goes, was a different kettle of fish entirely.

How eloquent he must have been. Rotsieve, in self-righteous and moral dudgeon, was capable of dictating the first dozen chapters of a definitive tract on misogyny without taking a breath; he was venomous and poetic, vicious and lyrical in his protracted monologues. No female acquaintance, public figure or blood relation escaped indictment. To Rotsieve, there were no individual women; they were all expressions and permutations of a solitary and monolithic malignancy. He was bigoted, rhetorical, narrowly focused, dismissive of contrary argument (however well-reasoned), merciless, tyrannical and...

And Milieu had borne the full brunt of his tirade. To Rotsieve, she was one of Them: no more and no less. He had retreated into himself to warm his hands at the fire of his indignation: "Victor", as if he were a recalcitrant schoolboy; "Mrs. Potts" his vainglorious mediocrity of a schoolmarm. The whisk broom of his outrage swept the astonished (and thoroughly inebriated) Milieu onto the dust heap of his irreducible gender prejudice. "*Toutes les femmes*," he remembered snarling, in some context or other, mere inches from her face. He winced at the fragment of memory. How long had he gone on? There was no telling. He remembered pausing only once, when she picked up the white notebook. "What are you doing with that?" he had snapped, his voice predatory, animalistic. She had looked up at him then, and he had seen the tears, her lips trembling and slightly parted. He heard the shuddering intake of breath which signaled...

But she had recovered herself and, even through the crimson mist of his anger, he could see the prodigious inner strength and resource that that had required. She had dropped the notebook onto the coffee table, lightly, so that it made almost no sound.

"You're welcome," she said quietly, without irony, without anger, without bitterness. She dropped the last of her cigarette into the dregs of her wine. She then took up her coat and her purse, and she left, shutting the door so that it, too, made little or no sound.

Victor rose from his bath and began drying himself. He had to get ready if he was to be on time for his meeting with Karen Potts.



In the back of the cab, Victor shut his eyes and tried to recover some of the exhilaration of the previous day. How confident he had been then of his own success. Now, he was afraid, though he scarcely admitted this, even to himself. "Remit advance payment in full." How much was left? He scarcely knew. His bank statements, bills and letters from the accounting firm



lay in careless disorder in the middle drawer of his desk. What were such trivial matters to one such as himself – renowned author, lion of the literary world? He was, after all, THE Victor Reid, wasn't he? And he was wealthy. His contract was one of the largest, if not THE largest, ever signed. He slid upright in his seat and drew in a great breath through his nostrils, as befitted a Lord of the Printed Page. The effort started well but grew ragged at the end, and Victor shuddered, spoiling the effect he had intended for himself. He slumped resignedly forward. His hands were damp, and the folder which held an encapsulation of his (Milieu's) new research was now puckered in the shape of his palm. He put it down on the seat beside him and wiped his hands on his pant legs. The cab driver informed him that they had arrived at his destination. Alighting on the sidewalk, he looked up at the sign above the massive oaken doors. The concentric rings around the silhouette of the horse's head looked to Victor like repeated images of a hangman's noose, closing tighter and tighter.



He gave his name to the receptionist and told her he was here to see Karen Potts. She asked him to repeat his name (which he did), then asked him to spell it (which he did). Was Mrs. Potts expecting him? Victor had a sudden mental image of a wooden rack in a dungeon lit by wavering torches and a massive woman in a black hood holding implements of wrought iron over a smouldering hearth.

"Oh, yes," Victor replied.

"Just one moment," she said pleasantly and disappeared behind a plain wooden door with a pane of frosted glass. Victor sat uneasily on the edge of a chair, trying to look alert and productive. Then he sat back and crossed his legs, trying to look relaxed, but amenable and interested. Then he put his arm along the back of the chair, swiftly removing it lest his posture be misconstrued as laziness. The receptionist returned and he snapped forward in what he hoped was an attitude of eagerness and youthful vigor.

"Mrs. Potts is very busy, but she would like you to wait," she informed him.

"Ah, wonderful," he replied, nodding vigorously. The receptionist looked at him strangely. So, by way of clarification, he added, "if she's busy, then things must be going very well here."

The receptionist smiled professionally, and Victor grinned like a politician facing certain defeat in an important by-election.

The afternoon seemed interminable. People came and went through the door with the frosted glass, stopping every once in a while to ask the receptionist to send something by messenger or to drop off various packages and memos. A casually dressed young fellow came in to inquire about Vertigo Horse's submission guidelines. Without looking up, the receptionist passed him a few sheets of paper, folded, with the distinctive logo printed on one side. The fellow unfolded the sheets and began to read them.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist said, pleasantly (but firmly), "do you have an appointment with anyone?" He stammered and, bowing his head (slightly, three times), he backed out of the door and closed it, cutting off his own apology in mid-sentence.

"You must get a lot of that," said Victor, nodding in the direction of the closed door. Her professional smile flared briefly, without warmth. Victor nodded agreement to himself and earnestly examined the painting on the far wall, as if discovering it for the first time.



After a couple of hours, Victor's legs and back began to ache and, without thinking, he stood up. The receptionist looked up from her work without moving her head, her pen held lightly just above the paper. It was as if the curtains had parted and Victor stood in the center of a stage, a full house anticipating his first scene with indifferent curiosity. He considered stretching or yawning, but his inner voice cautioned him against appearing either lazy, or tired, or impatient, or indifferent or any combination thereof. The moment seemed to stretch into eternity, their eyes locked together, sharing between them the receptionist's unspoken question. At last, Victor put his hand over his mouth and coughed, quietly, before resuming his seat. Again, the landscape opposite him seized hold of his attention, new depths of purpose and undiscovered subtleties of execution suddenly revealing themselves. He stole a furtive glance in the direction of the receptionist, out of the corner of his eye, and saw, to his great relief, that she was once more at work and entirely ignorant of his very existence.



A distant bell rang twice, and the receptionist stood and walked back through the frosted glass door. When she returned, several minutes later, she had donned her coat and was rummaging through her purse. Victor peered at the landscape once more, raising his eyebrows as if remarking to himself on still and yet another of the *maitre's* seemingly infinite capacity for chromatic legerdemain.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Potts won't be able to see you today," the receptionist informed him.



"Mmm?" said Victor, tearing his eyes reluctantly from what could easily have been one of the two or three greatest examples of an oil landscape he had seen in his lifetime. The receptionist smiled as if indulging a small child caught in a transparent fib.

"She expects you back here first thing in the morning," she said. "We open at 8:30."

"Well, I'll see you then," said Victor, grinning. The receptionist, having concluded her working day, felt no compulsion to smile on her own time and departed without another word.



Victor returned home, feeling completely drained of all his energy and essence. It was a husk, a shell of the former Victor who paid the cab driver – a shell, a husk of the former Victor who stood at the curb and counted his change to the last coin. The driver raked him with a disdainful look as he realized that no gratuity was forthcoming. With a little practice, Victor thought, ruefully, you might one day become a receptionist in a large publishing house, my good man.



Shuffling across the threshold, Victor's foot struck a small white envelope which skittered away from him across the parquet flooring. He stooped to pick it up and opened it slowly.

Victor,
I'm sorry about last night. I hope everything went well at your meeting today.

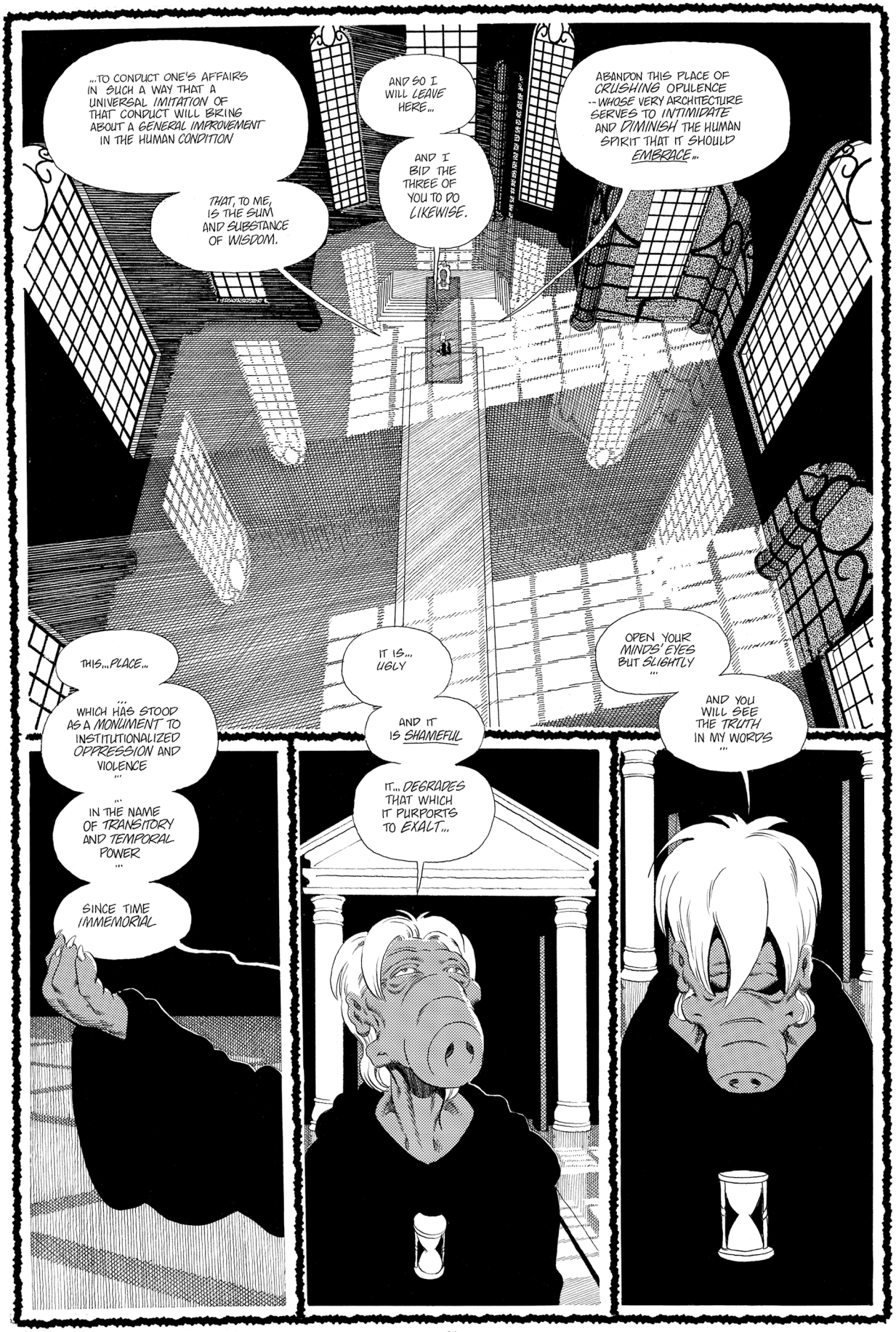
Milieu



Victor started to pour himself a cognac and paused before the glass was half full. He stood for a moment, introspectively, before carefully pouring the contents back into the cut crystal decanter, holding the glass in place until he was certain that each drop had been replaced. He poured himself a glass of plain seltzer water and slowly climbed the stairs to his study, where he began to open his bills and his bank statements.



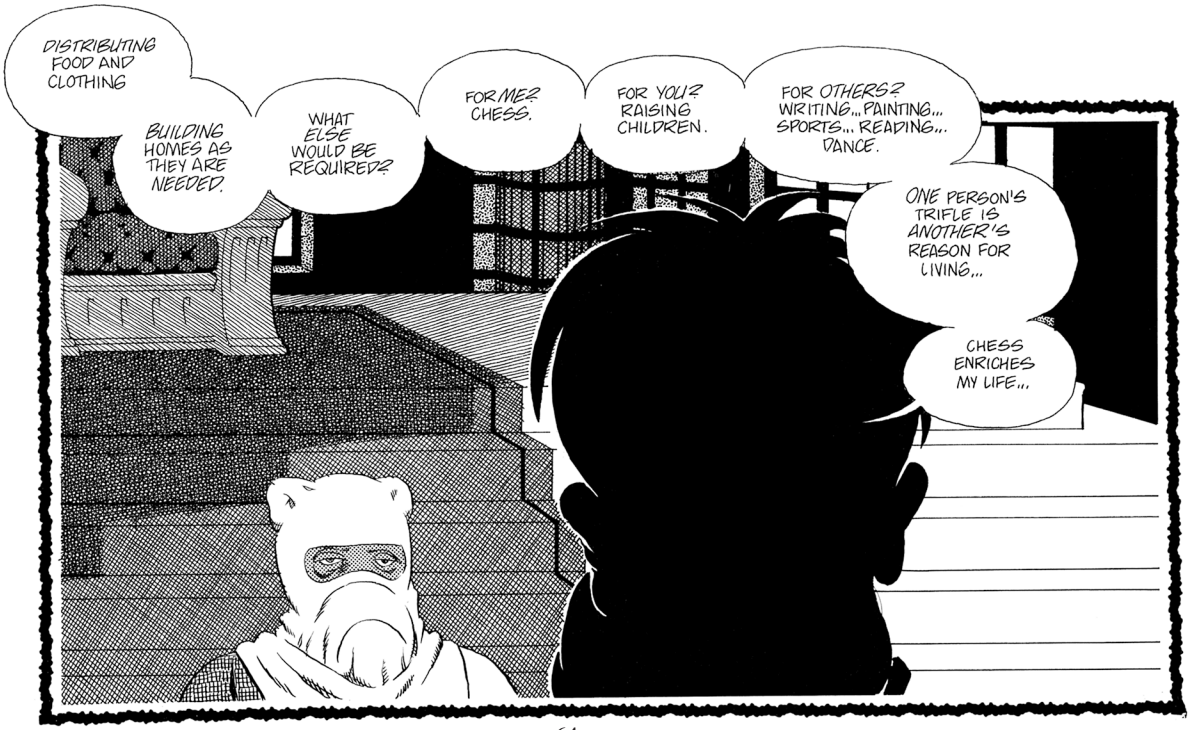

I HAVE...
A FEW WORDS TO SAY.
AND THEN I WILL TAKE MY LEAVE OF YOU.
FOR I HAVE NO INTEREST IN THE ISSUE WHICH, HERE, CONSUMES YOUR ATTENTIONS
'GOD OR GODDESS'?
MANIFESTATIONS OF BOTH EXIST ALL AROUND YOU IN WAYS OBVIOUS TO EVEN THE SMALLEST CHILD ...
IT MAKES AS MUCH SENSE FOR YOU TO CONTEMPLATE THE RELATIVE MERITS OF COMPLIMENTARY NATURES
...TO DETERMINE WHICH, OF THE TWO, IS PREEMINENT
AS IT WOULD FOR A FLY ON MY WINDOWSILL TO QUESTION WHETHER IT WAS BETTER FOR ME TO MOVE MY BISHOP OR MY QUEEN IN A GAME OF CHESS ...
THE ONLY SENSIBLE LEADERSHIP-- THE ONLY EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP-- I HAVE FOUND, IS LEADERSHIP BY EXAMPLE ...


...TO CONDUCT ONE'S AFFAIRS IN SUCH A WAY THAT A UNIVERSAL IMITATION OF THAT CONDUCT WILL BRING ABOUT A GENERAL IMPROVEMENT IN THE HUMAN CONDITION
THAT, TO ME, IS THE SUM AND SUBSTANCE OF WISDOM.
AND SO I WILL LEAVE HERE...
AND I BID THE THREE OF YOU TO DO LIKEWISE.
ABANDON THIS PLACE OF CRUSHING OPULENCE --WHOSE VERY ARCHITECTURE SERVES TO INTIMIDATE AND DIMINISH THE HUMAN SPIRIT THAT IT SHOULD EMBRACE...
THIS...PLACE...
...WHICH HAS STOOD AS A MONUMENT TO INSTITUTIONALIZED OPPRESSION AND VIOLENCE...
...IN THE NAME OF TRANSITORY AND TEMPORAL POWER...
SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL
IT IS... UGLY
AND IT IS SHAMEFUL
IT... DEGRADES THAT WHICH IT PURPORTS TO EXALT...
OPEN YOUR MINDS' EYES BUT SLIGHTLY...
AND YOU WILL SEE THE TRUTH IN MY WORDS...


ASTORIA.
THE MOMENT YOU SET FOOT OUTSIDE THAT HOTEL... WITHOUT AN ENTOURAGE... WITHOUT AN ARMY...
WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A SINGLE BODYGUARD...
AT THAT MOMENT
YOU WERE TRULY FREE.
HAD YOU WALKED AWAY FROM THERE— INTO THE LOWER CITY— THERE TO LOSE YOURSELF AMONG THE MASSES OF ORDINARY PEOPLE...
YOU WOULD HAVE REMAINED FREE...
INSTEAD.
INSTEAD YOU CAME HERE...
AND, IN SO DOING, YOU HAVE TRADED THE SPIRITUAL CAPTIVITY OF A POLITICAL FIGURE...
...FOR THE MORE WRETCHED IMPRISONMENT OF A WOULD-BE MESSIAH...


IT TOOK THE IMMINENCE OF CERTAIN DEATH TO MAKE YOU REALIZE THAT YOU DON'T DESIRE FOLLOWERS
A THRONE
UNQUESTIONING OBEDIENCE...
AND I ASK YOU NOW-- IN LIGHT OF YOUR NEW INSIGHT...
IF YOU PERSIST IN THE ...FOLLY... OF THE ASCENSION WHICH WILL SOON TAKE PLACE...
WHAT OTHER RESULT COULD THERE BE?
WHAT OTHER RESULT COULD RATIONALLY BE HOPED-FOR?
EXCEPT FOLLOWERS ...
A THRONE
AND UNQUESTIONING OBEDIENCE?
I...
ONCE A PROFOUND TRUTH HAS BEEN SEEN...
IT CANNOT BE 'UNSEEN'
THERE'S NO 'GOING BACK' TO THE PERSON YOU WERE.
EVEN IF SUCH A POSSIBILITY DID EXIST...
WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO?


THAT'S YOUR SOLUTION TO THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS PO?
THAT WE ALL SIT AROUND AND PLAY... CHESS?
I CAN ASSURE YOU THAT A MOTHER'S LIFE IS TOO BUSY FOR SUCH... TRIFLES
THE POPULATION BASE IS ENORMOUS, CIRIN...
IF EVERYONE '''
...EVERYONE...
DEVOTED A FEW HOURS A WEEK TO ASSISTING IN FARMING '''
WEAVING FABRICS...
SEWING CLOTHES


DISTRIBUTING FOOD AND CLOTHING
BUILDING HOMES AS THEY ARE NEEDED.
WHAT ELSE WOULD BE REQUIRED?
FOR ME? CHESS.
FOR YOU? RAISING CHILDREN.
FOR OTHERS? WRITING... PAINTING... SPORTS... READING... DANCE.
ONE PERSON'S TRIFLE IS ANOTHER'S REASON FOR LIVING...
CHESS ENRICHES MY LIFE...


IT IS SELF INDULGENCE. UNPRODUCTIVE SELF-INDULGENCE
I ADMIT THAT...
FREELY.
WHY WON'T YOU ADMIT THAT IN AN OVER-POPULATED WORLD...
THE GREATEST SELF-INDULGENCE ...
IS CHILD-BIRTH.
SAVE YOUR BREATH, PO...
BOTH CEREBUS AND CIRIN-- THEY'RE NOT-- THEY CAN'T
LISTEN OR...
THEY LISTEN BUT THEY CAN'T HEAR!
CEREBUS HASN'T HEARD A WORD AFTER YOU TOLD HIM HE HAS US AT HIS MERCY
DAMN RIGHT--
CEREBUS COULD KILL YOU ALL IN A FEW SECONDS!
YOU SEE?!
AND CIRIN!!
IF IT ISN'T ABOUT BLOODY CHILDREN YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE SPEAKING IN A --
YES, ASTORIA.


YOUR VIEWS ARE WELL-KNOWN TO US ALL ... AS I HAVE SAID, I WILL BE LEAVING SHORTLY "
AT THAT POINT I AM SURE ALL THREE OF YOU WILL HAVE A GREAT DEAL TO DISCUSS.
I ASK ONLY THAT YOU PERMIT ME TO STATE MY VIEWS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION BEFORE MY DEPARTURE "
FOR YOU TO INTERJECT THE OBSERVATION THAT CIRIN AND CEREBUS AREN'T CAPABLE OF LISTENING IS MORE THAN A
LOOK! ...
ALL I WAS SAYING— WAS
SORRY.
GO AHEAD.
THANK YOU.
I'LL TRY TO BE BRIEF.
CIRIN...?


50

Gingerly, upon his lap, Victor Reid held the fragile cut-and-pasted first installment of Ascension. The previous night, he had decided that he simply couldn't face his meeting with Karen Potts (assuming she would even grant him an audience today) unarmed. He had hastily assembled the first chapter, cobbling together fragments from an unpublished short story, paragraphs he had intended for a much later appearance in the series as well as disconnected bits of

Milieu's research, fleshing out the resultant patchwork quilt with bridging and connecting passages that were (at best) awkward and (at worst) completely irrelevant to his story. He was doubtful that he could, when the time came, make sense of the dissonant new elements but (thought Victor, ruefully), he would just have to jump off that bridge when he came to it.

He found a certain poetic resonance in the fact that the fractured, hodgepodge installment and his life mirrored one another. He was a wealthy man, contemplating imminent – virtually inevitable – poverty (five hundred and fifty-six crowns represented the residuary lifeblood in his hemorrhaging bank account); he was popular, well-loved and yet completely alone; he was too affluent to enjoy the company of the working classes and too working-class for the sensibilities of the wealthy; he was His Own Boss ("the pilot of his destiny and the captain of his soul", as the saying went) whose extremities froze and whose heart palpitated at the prospect of confronting an unsalaried receptionist.

Even as the taxi lurched and bounced across the Rivershire Bridge into the Lower City, even as he gently braced the newly reassembled *Ascension* (the completed chapter as well as the – he fervently hoped – intriguing ten-part outline), the newly reassembled Victor was rehearsing a variety of unsuitable overtures.

"Mrs. Potts wants to see this right away."

Too impertinent. Had Mrs. Potts not already indicated that she felt no great urgency to see Victor himself? Was it not altogether likely that her anticipation of his scrapheap composition's arrival might, most charitably, be described as less-than-breathless in its nature?

"This is the first installment of my read. I wonder if you would mind taking it in to Mrs. Potts?"

Too obsequious. What if she said, "Why, yes – I mind very much", and then mentioned his effrontery to Mrs. Potts herself? What if she said "Oh, *Ascension*. You must be Victor Reid. Mrs. Potts asked me to get a bank draught for two thousand crowns from you?"

"I'm afraid this installment is very late. You'd better take it in to Mrs. Potts right away."

Too confessional *and* too impertinent. What if the receptionist were under strict instructions to summon a constable and to have recalcitrant authors charged, on the spot, with fraud or embezzlement? What if there were a Deadline Policeman equipped with a studded truncheon on the very premises?

Victor's heart was pounding and his throat dry as he stepped into the receptionist's lair, swiftly placing the manuscript and outline on his adversary's desk.

"Excuse me this is the first installment and outline for *Ascension* which is the read I wrote and I'm afraid I'm delivering it late but Mrs. Potts will want to see it right away because as I said it's very late before I go in to meet with her if she has the time later on right away if you wouldn't mind."

Victor bit his bottom lip and braced himself for a stinging rebuke. A glimmer of hope flared in his breast as the receptionist simply stared at the disjointed pile of papers before her. Indisputably, he had gained the high ground. The hairpin turns from aggression to confession to impertinence shored up with parenthetical bracings of deferential obsequiousness had her flummoxed. What could the poor girl say? Double usage of the word "late", underscored by Victor's quietly panic-stricken demeanour, had struck a deep and resonant chord. The mere act of placing the manuscript on her desk had threatened to make the receptionist a *de facto* co-conspirator in Victor's procrastination. She raised her head slowly and favoured him with a smile which caused the room temperature to drop, abruptly, by several degrees.

"If you'll have a seat...?"

The ellipsis was pregnant with unspoken, yet dire, consequence. "If you'll have a seat, it will give me time to determine the best way to rid myself of you and your petty problem. If you'll have a seat, I will set to work immediately planning the most excruciatingly painful demise for you."

Victor edged backward and lowered himself slowly onto his familiar chair. Instead of looking at the landscape, he focused his attention on the receptionist, who had resumed her writing. She attempted to meet his gaze with intimidating disinterest. It was, however, too late. The curtains had parted once more, but now she was the player upon the stage and Victor was her audience, regarding her with indifferent curiosity.

After a few moments, in her best thespian manner,



she replaced her pen in her ornate desk set. Heaving a sigh of theatrical proportions (appropriate to the room's acoustics), she rose, assembling a small pile of memos, letters and packages. She then turned upon her heel and opened the frosted door and was about to step through to the inner sanctum of Vertigo Horse. Here, she halted (a gesture broad enough to play effectively to the upper reaches of the second balcony; a gesture which plainly stated, "Oh, I almost forgot."). Turning back to her desk, she scooped up the *Ascension* chapter and outline in a single smooth and efficient movement and then she was gone, shutting the door a little more firmly (Victor suspected) than she had intended.

Victor smiled and eased himself back into his chair, joining his hands behind his head and jauntily crossing his legs. His left foot danced merrily on air. He softly hummed to himself.



Two hours later, Victor was sitting as agreeably upright in the chair as he could manage; his hands were folded as inoffensively as possible in his lap. Staring at the landscape (he had decided, about forty minutes before) bespoke a kind of willful arrogance, an unbecoming pride; instead he examined, thoughtfully, his inoffensively folded hands, wondering why it was that they seemed so far away from him.

Ah, thought Victor.

The last time he had found himself sitting just this way, there had been a small rectangular desktop level with his chest as he served the only detention he had been assessed during his years of public school.

Twice he had hazarded a glance in the direction of the receptionist out of the corner of his eye. On both occasions, she had been staring directly at him, smiling serenely.



"Victor Reid?"

"Yes?" he answered, far too quickly and far too loudly, leaping to his feet. Rescuer or tormentor, executioner or savior; anything was preferable to another moment in this room, the weight of the receptionist's gaze like a millstone around his neck, a vise crushing his heart.

"I'm Carl Berger, Mrs. Potts' assistant."

They shook hands then, beaming at one another. Some moments later, Victor felt Berger's hand tug slightly, which Victor took as a signal to disengage. Victor did so somewhat reluctantly, fearful that the man might depart, leaving Victor trapped once more in reception purgatory.

"I'm a big admirer of your work," Berger said after several moments of silent beaming (leaning back a bit as a silent, beaming Victor stepped closer to him).

"Ah," Victor had said. There was no suitable rejoinder or response to such an observation (as any author could tell you), but the palpable gratitude welling up within Victor demanded release of some kind.

"Well, I'm very pleased to meet here." He had intended to say, "I'm very pleased to meet you" or "I'm very pleased to be here." If Berger had noticed the hybrid *non sequitur*, he gave no sign.

"Well, let's go back to my office, shall we?"

Manfully, Victor resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at the receptionist as he passed her desk.



"There are some very good things in here," said Carl Berger, tapping the pile of papers in front of him (a thin strip of words came loose, adhering to his index finger; he flicked at it lightly with his thumb until it detached itself and rejoined its fellows).

"There's a lot of..."

His brow furrowed and he seemed to drift away, flipping through some manner of mental thesaurus for an appropriate noun.

"...research," he said at last (in a toneless voice as furrowed as his brow) and then looked perplexed, as if his sentence had ended itself in a manner at considerable variance to his original intention for it. He looked up at Victor, his eyebrows arched in genuine surprise, as if to say, "You noticed it too, didn't you?"

"You've gone to a lot of trouble here, Victor," he said, regarding the small stack of pages as he would a singularly endearing beggar or orphan. He then looked up at Victor with an identical expression, effectively uniting the author and his work in a common state of abject misery. "Which makes what I have to tell you all the more...difficult."

Victor felt sudden and simultaneous urges to defecate, vomit and cry. The floor fell away beneath him and he could feel the beige walls edging closer to each other and to him, as if, as members in good standing in the vast Vertigo Horse empire, they were as entitled as Carl Berger to share in this carrion feast.

"Karen – Mrs. Potts," he continued (establishing their respective proximities relative to the editor


DVS

in absentia: Berger steadfastly by her side, trusted aide, confidant and ally, and Victor, somewhere beneath the sole of her shoe, slowly being ground into a less troublesome configuration of flesh and blood), "feels that you could've saved yourself a lot of wasted time and effort if only we could've...gotten together on this some weeks ago."

The plurality of the nominative pronoun beckoned to Victor like a life preserver on the waves of disaster washing over and around him. He hurled himself at it, clutching it to him, wedding it to his heart and soul.

"Well – uh – what can *we* do?" he stammered, hoarsely.

Carl Berger leaned back in his oversized chair, considering their mutual problem, pressing his lips against his clasped hands. Victor, unconsciously, did the same. There they sat, as Berger considered their mutual options, carefully, and Victor awaited their mutual conclusion – whatever Berger decided it would be – anxiously. The very thought that their mutual conclusion might be a parting of the ways filled Victor with a nameless dread, for he knew exactly what that would entail: Victor trading his townhouse, his furniture, his expensive clothes and the remnants of his bank account for a small pile of pasted-together bits of paper.

"I'm not sure there's *anything. . .we. . .can. . .do. . .*" said Berger, sliding forward, as if signaling by ellipsis and emphasis that he had switched to a foreign language or a Vertigo Horse dialect with which Victor was wholly unfamiliar, but which he would have to translate for himself (although he got the impression that Berger was doing his best to assist Victor in this regard).

Anything. We. Can.

Victor picked and prodded at the three words, turning them over in his mind in an attempt to extract their hidden significance. Though no mention had been made of any temporal constraint, Victor was certain he had only a limited amount of time in which to solve the puzzle.

"The printing deadline is five days from now," said Berger, as if speaking, helpfully, to a more than usually dim-witted child. It must be another clue, thought Victor. Berger turned his left palm upward, holding the hand open, as if it contained some manifestation of his just-completed assertion.

"The manuscript isn't what we're looking for," his right palm now mirrored his left. The palms, the sentences, were two halves of a mathematical problem. Victor? Two...plus...two...equals?

"Maybe," Victor offered, warily, "maybe if I knew what you were looking for." (He was thinking, you want me to say "four", I'll say "four" – you want me to say "seven", I'll say "seven" – only please don't take my townhouse.)

Berger smiled beneficently. Victor, inwardly, heaved a sigh of relief. It was going to be all right. He had given the right answer.



"For three months now," Carl Berger said, with newfound enthusiasm, "Deedee and Em have been rating your three *Palnu* reads at or near the top of their Top One Hundred list."

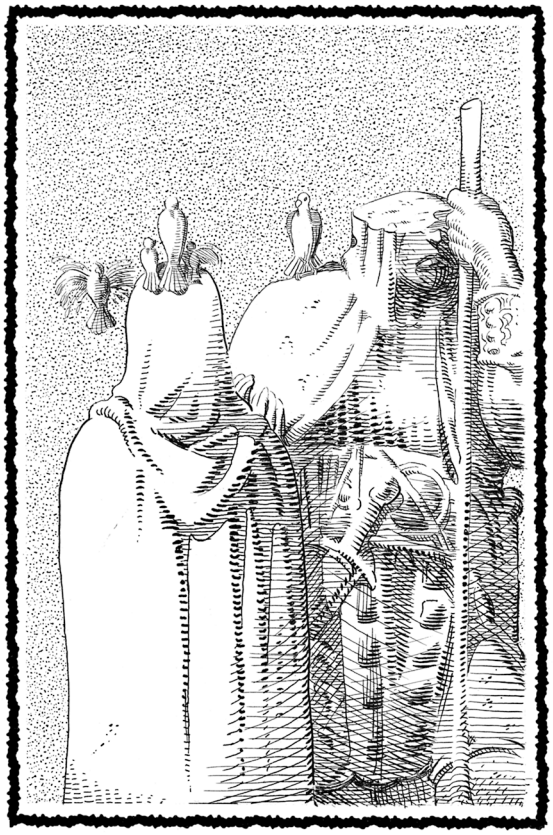
Victor wondered why the opinions of two women regarding his *Palnu* reads would have any significance for Carl Berger or Vertigo Horse. Berger had removed a booklet from the top drawer of his desk and was holding it up for Victor to see. On the cover were two stylized, inter-locking "D's and an over-sized "M". D. D. M. Davis, Diamond and Madison. It was, evidently, a publication of theirs entitled "Internal Dialogue".

Berger paused, mistaking the confusion on Victor's face for bruised artistic sensibilities.

"Please don't get me wrong," he admonished. "I told you that I'm a big admirer of your work and I am. That's why Karen – Mrs. Potts – asked me to speak with you. I've been following you for – Tarim, how long has it been, now? Ten years? Since I entered university. I must have scoured every reads store between here and Upper Felda looking for the reads that I missed. The minute one of your new works comes in, I have to sit down and finish it before I do anything else. It's about the only thing that I go into a reads store to look for. I mean, all of the things coming out now are such a pile of..."

He paused, then, as if remembering who and where he was, and scanned the immediate vicinity as if checking for any late-arriving body parts of the auditory persuasion, fearful that some part of the beige wall behind him had already detached itself and might, even now, be gliding stealthily towards him. He leaned forward, conspiratorially, and gestured for Victor to follow suit.

"What Mr. Prosserman wants," Victor noted the singularity of the name and took the conspicuous absence of "Mike" as an indication that he and Berger were on an equal footing – or sharing the same leaky rowboat – relative to Vertigo Horse's owner-publisher. "What Mr. Prosserman wants is something along the lines of your *Palnu* series. You've been in this business a lot longer than I have, Victor. I don't need to tell you what a phenomenon you've created. I understand that Shadow Press has had to buy its own printing



plant and they *still* can't keep up with the demand." He grinned broadly. "I can't even imagine what your royalty cheques must look like. All those zeroes."

Carl Berger was a person of, to understate the case dramatically, severely limited imagination. But zeroes, many zeroes, zeroes inscribed upon a cashier's cheque stretching away from him, vanishing over some distant horizon…that many zeroes were the stuff of which Carl Berger's dreams were constituted. His eyes half-lidded, he leaned back in his chair, savouring the image, vicariously, on Victor's behalf. As a result, it escaped his notice that Victor was frozen in his present posture, statue-like (though his eyes had widened dramatically and his face had drained of the little colour it possessed), his gaze still fixed on the space recently vacated by Carl Berger's head.

Alas, even so simple and redundant an image can only occupy the limited attention spans of the Carl Bergers of the world for so many moments before they are supplanted by the here and now. Seeing that Victor was still hunched forward in an attitude of rapt (albeit somewhat glassy-eyed) interest, Carl Berger's head reoccupied the space in question and resumed its exposition.

"We had advance orders for eighty thousand copies of the first installment of *Ascension*. That doesn't even include the advance reorders. When you missed your deadline, we cancelled the original solicitation and had Deedee and Em resolicit. We got orders for one hundred and TWENTY thousand. A fifty per cent increase on a resolicitation. If it wasn't for the fact that we need the money because nothing else around here sells worth…"

Again, Berger stopped in mid-sentence to regard his environs, warily. A singularly large fern (in the corner, by the window) seemed to arouse his suspicions, but as it contented itself with merely sitting there, contrasting nicely with the beige of the walls, he turned back to Victor and continued (though he did lower his voice a notch or two):

"…I think we'd just go on cancelling and resoliciting and cancelling and resoliciting until we hit…a *million!*"

Carl Berger burst forth in a fit of maniacal giggling that would not have been out of place in an institution dedicated to the care and handling of those members of society whom the Kevillists diplomatically referred to as the "mentally challenged". As Victor, for whatever reason (a disinterest in business concerns? sensitivity of the artistic sort?) did not see fit to join Berger in this jocular release, the assistant editor contained himself quickly, clearing his throat as if his outburst could (and should) be attributed to some rare and exotic form of whooping cough.

He frowned for what he hoped was a length of time sufficient to reassure his favourite author that he was a Serious Young Man, before permitting himself a smile.

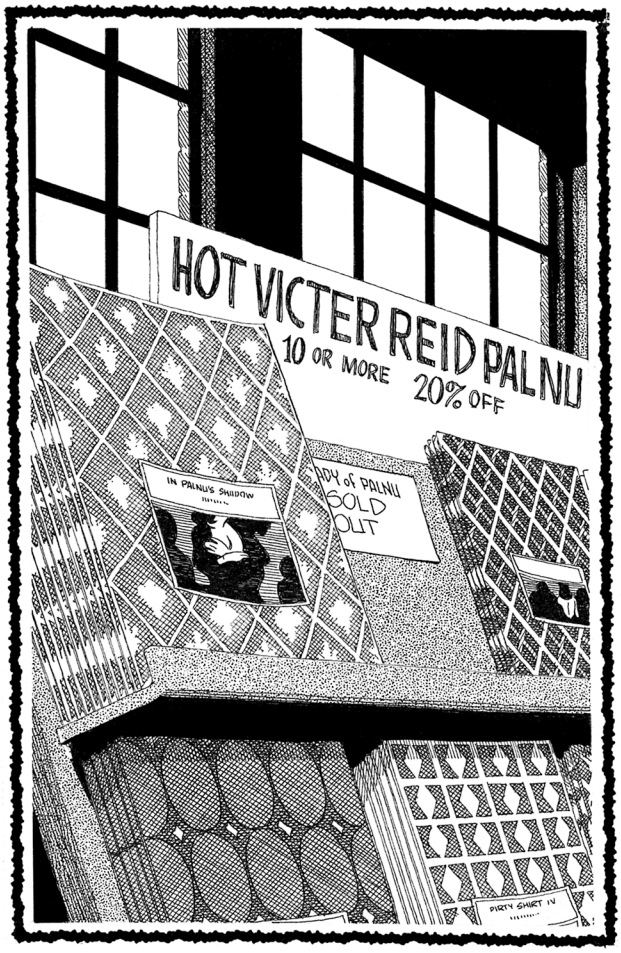
"We're very excited," he said. A vision of Denis Eastman joined the variety of disheartening images whirling through Victor's mind. "I realize that five days is not a lot of time, but we have a lot of confidence in you." Either Victor had missed something and Carl Berger had ascended to some throne or other during the author's momentary catatonia, or Mr. and Mrs. Potts-Prosserman had just joined them in spirit. He could almost picture them (though Mrs. Potts was less pictorially vivid, owing to Victor's never having met her), their heads bobbing in unison with Carl Berger's, smiling blissfully. His own head, by a kind of telepathic reflex, joined in.

"I'll do what I can," said Victor.

"Wonderful. Excellent," Carl Berger said, conveying the impression that consecutive superlatives were not an everyday occurrence within these beige walls.

Victor rose from his chair, small bones in his knees popping quietly in protest.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Berger said, so convincingly that Victor believed his recollection was not theatrical in its nature. "I have something to show you." He bustled off behind Victor, who stood regarding the fern, expecting that, at any moment, it too would begin to nod and smile fatuously. "We looked and looked for him, but he'd left. Extended vacation in the south. Rumours that he was going to buy Mehani – the whole island. James McNeil, the one who imitates his style so well, agreed to do the interiors, but Karen – Mrs. Potts – when she gets a bee in her bonnet about something…I thought I'd go mad. I tracked him down and he didn't want to do it, but I just kept offering him more and more money. I think he finally agreed just


HOT VICTER REID PALNU
10 OR MORE 20% OFF
IN PALNU'S SHADOW
SOLD
OUT
PARTY SHIRT IV

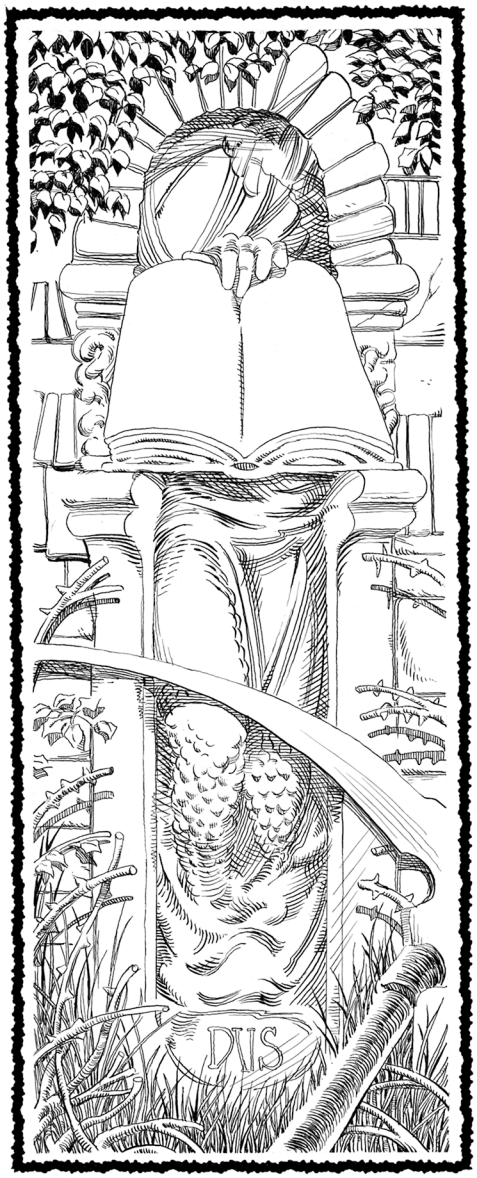
to get rid of me. Voila!"

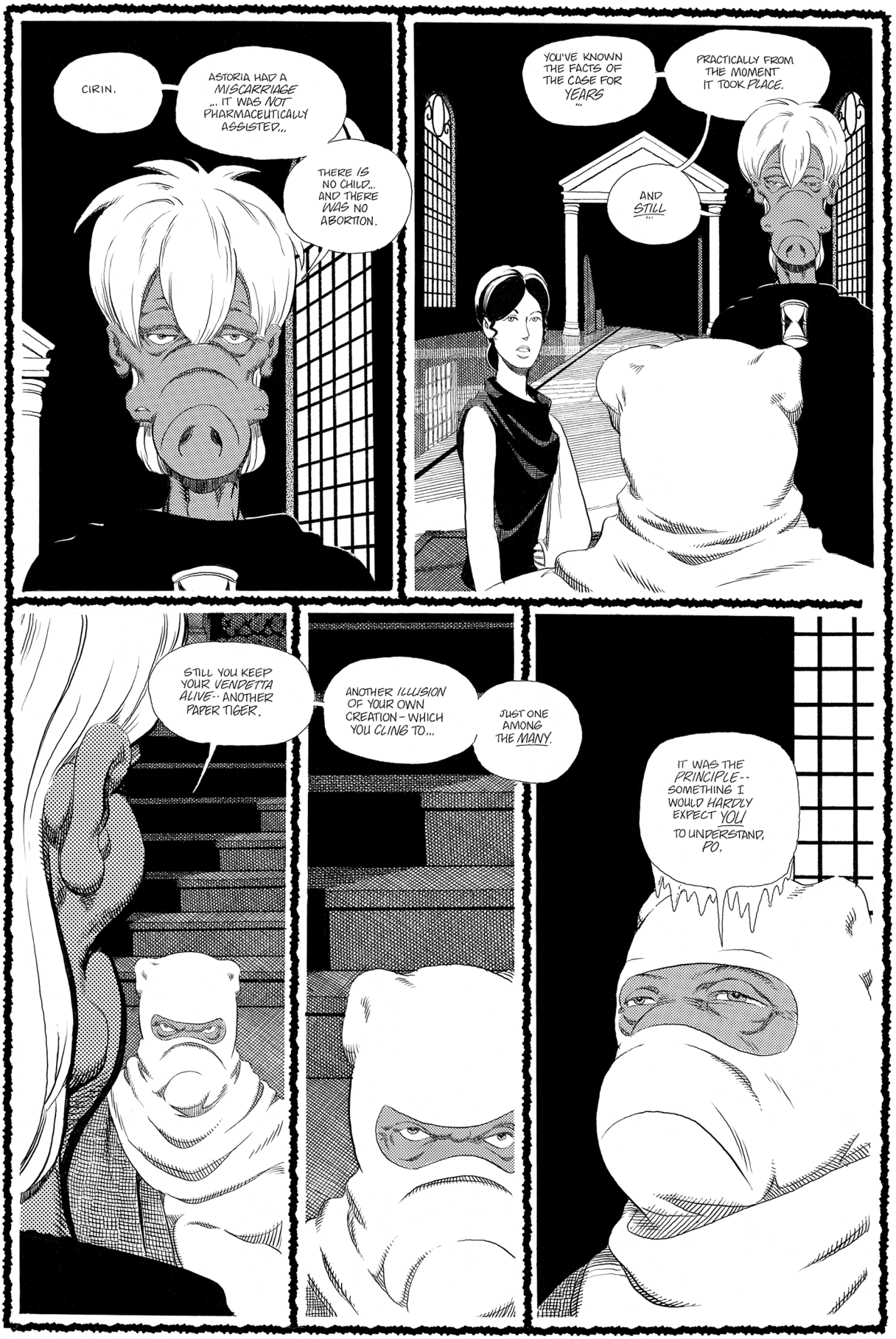
Berger held a piece of artboard in front of Victor. It was an M. Zulli piece: a picture of Beth (or her identical twin). Her head was thrown back, her mouth stretched open in full cry (of anger? pain? rage?).

Her hands, delicate and cream-coloured, were like claws, pulling her robe open. Almost the entirety of her upper body was exposed: four parallel lines, crimson welts, followed the curve of each breast, connecting to the respective fingernails.

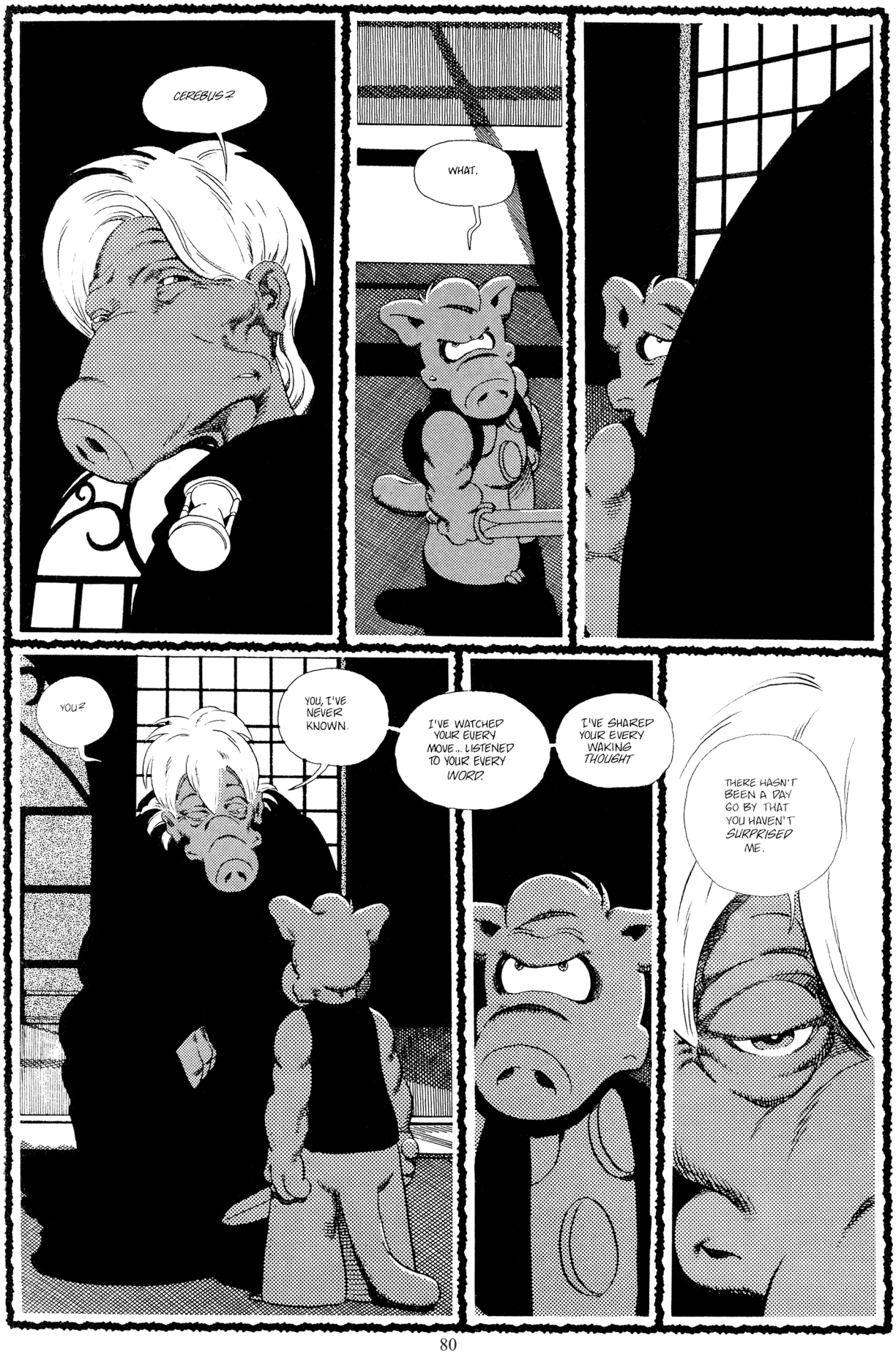
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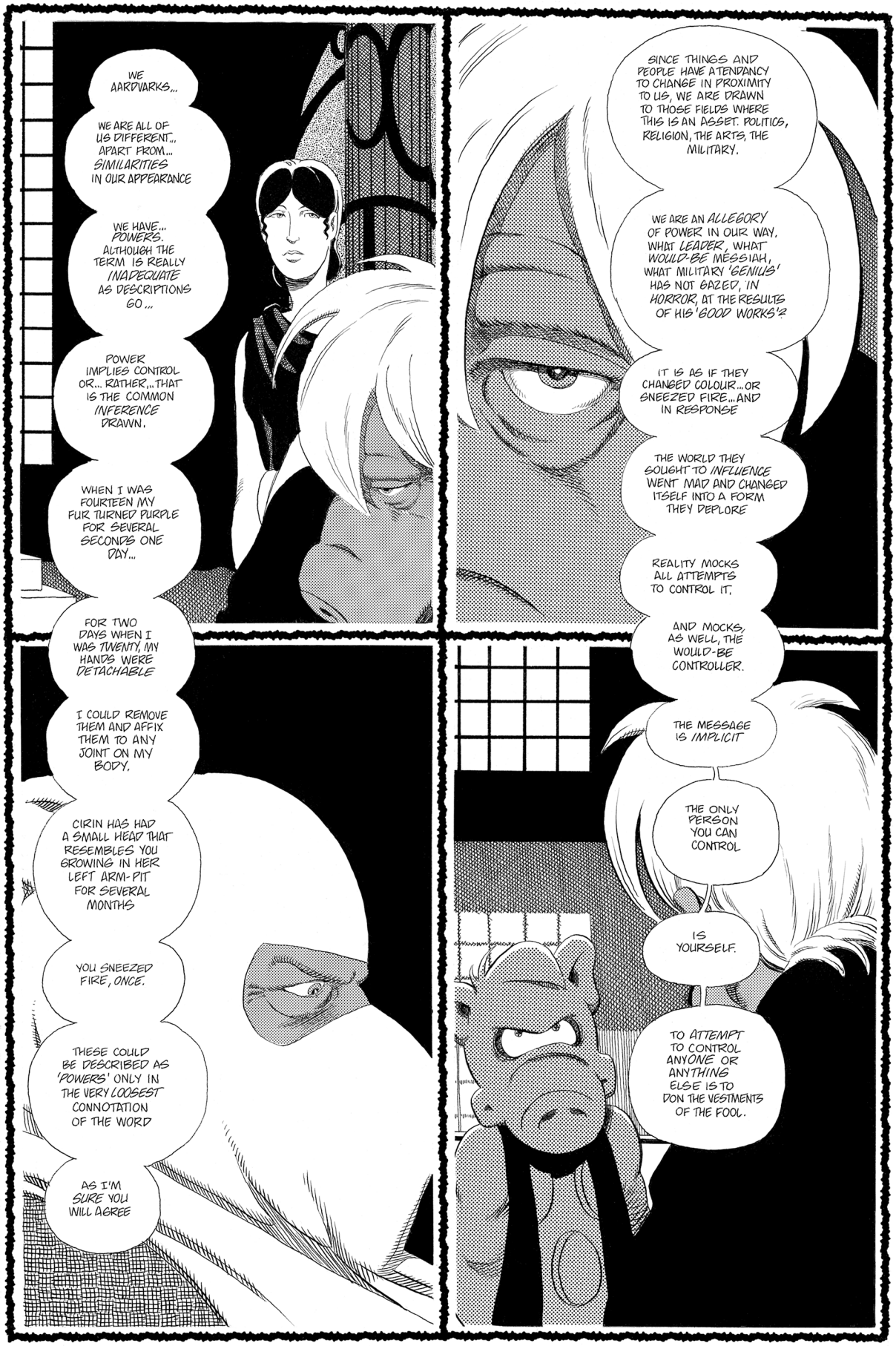
Ascension
by
Victor Reid

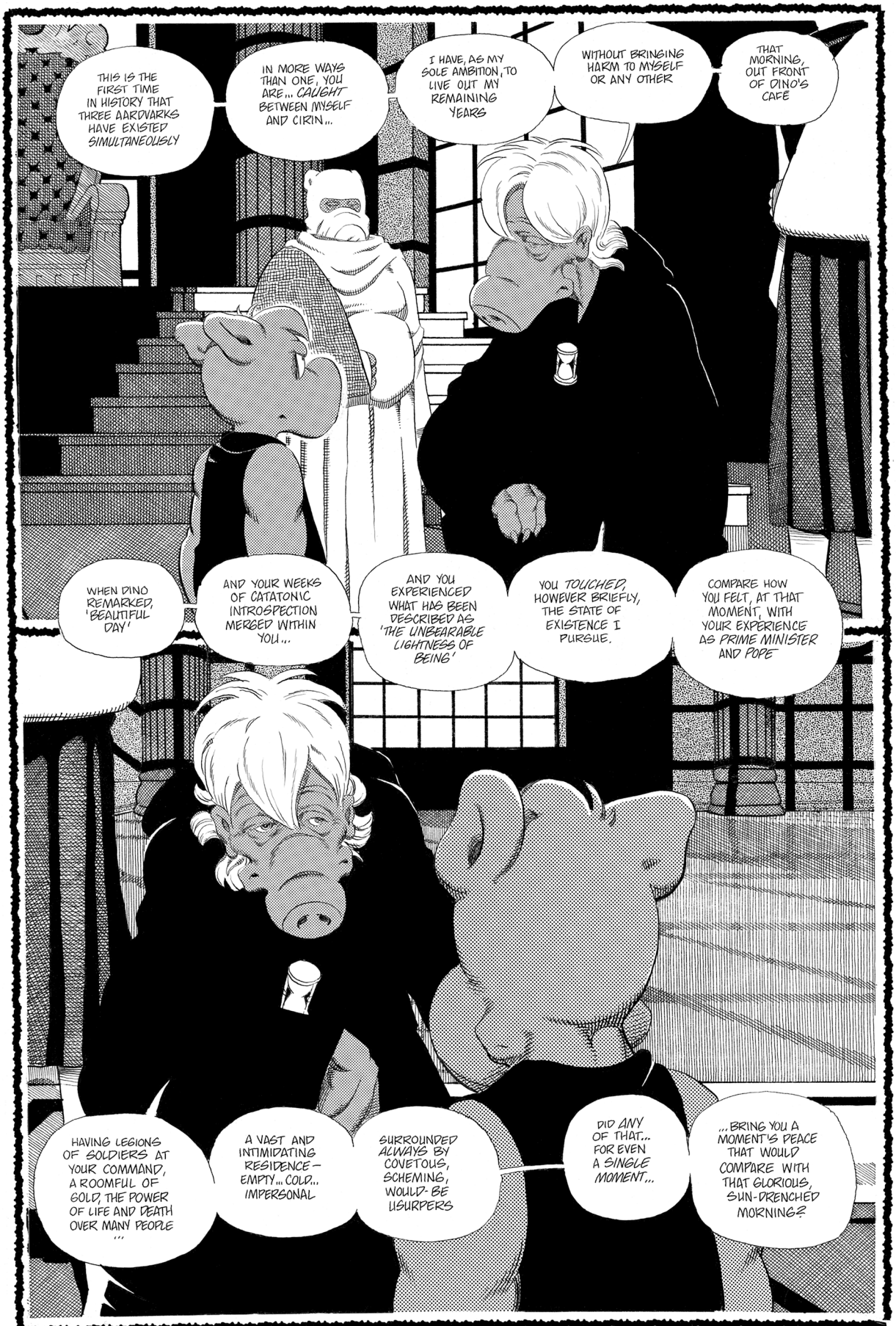

DIS


CIRIN.
ASTORIA HAD A MISCARRIAGE ... IT WAS NOT PHARMACEUTICALLY ASSISTED...
THERE IS NO CHILD.. AND THERE WAS NO ABORTION.
YOU'VE KNOWN THE FACTS OF THE CASE FOR YEARS ...
PRACTICALLY FROM THE MOMENT IT TOOK PLACE.
AND STILL ...
STILL YOU KEEP YOUR VENDETTA ALIVE.. ANOTHER PAPER TIGER.
ANOTHER ILLUSION OF YOUR OWN CREATION – WHICH YOU CLING TO...
JUST ONE AMONG THE MANY.
IT WAS THE PRINCIPLE-- SOMETHING I WOULD HARDLY EXPECT YOU TO UNDERSTAND, PO.


WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO THE HONOURS?
PLEASE.
"WE BELIEVE, WITHOUT EQUIVOCATION, IN THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT OF FREE SPEECH. ADVOCACY OF ANY VIEWPOINT, HOWEVER DEPLORABLE, CANNOT, IN ANY WAY BE ABRIDGED, BANNED OR SUPPRESSED. IT IS ONLY WHEN SOMEONE CONTRAVENES OUR LAWS BY COMMITTING AN ACT OF CONTRAVENTION THAT WE, AS A SOCIETY ARE JUSTIFIED IN THE PROSECUTION OF THAT PERSON TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW.
"WORDS ARE NOT DEEDS, AND SO, FALL OUTSIDE OF OUR JURISDICTION."
THE NEW MATRIARCHY-- PAGE ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-EIGHT
YOU PROSECUTED -- AND PERSECUTED ASTORIA FOR A CRIME YOU KNEW SHE DID NOT COMMIT
THE ONLY 'PRINCIPLE' SHE VIOLATED WAS AN UNSPOKEN ONE -- ABSOLUTE FEALTY AND DEFERENCE TO 'GREAT CIRIN'
'''
SKITCH SKTCH
YOUR ONLY ENEMY IS AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN YOURSELF
'''
HOW MUCH BLOOD HAS BEEN SHED? HOW MANY LIVES HAVE BEEN LOST IN KEEPING THAT SIMPLE TRUTH FROM YOURSELF?
SNIFF
SNIFF SNIFF
WALK AWAY FROM HERE CIRIN, ASK FORGIVENESS OF THE GODDESS FOR YOUR TRANSGRESSIONS. SPEND THE REST OF YOUR DAYS CARING FOR THE CHILDREN -- YOUR FIRST AND GREATEST LOVE.
ACCEPT WHAT SUFFERING COMES TO YOU -- IN ACCEPTING IT, YOU WILL FIND TRUE REDEMPTION
'''

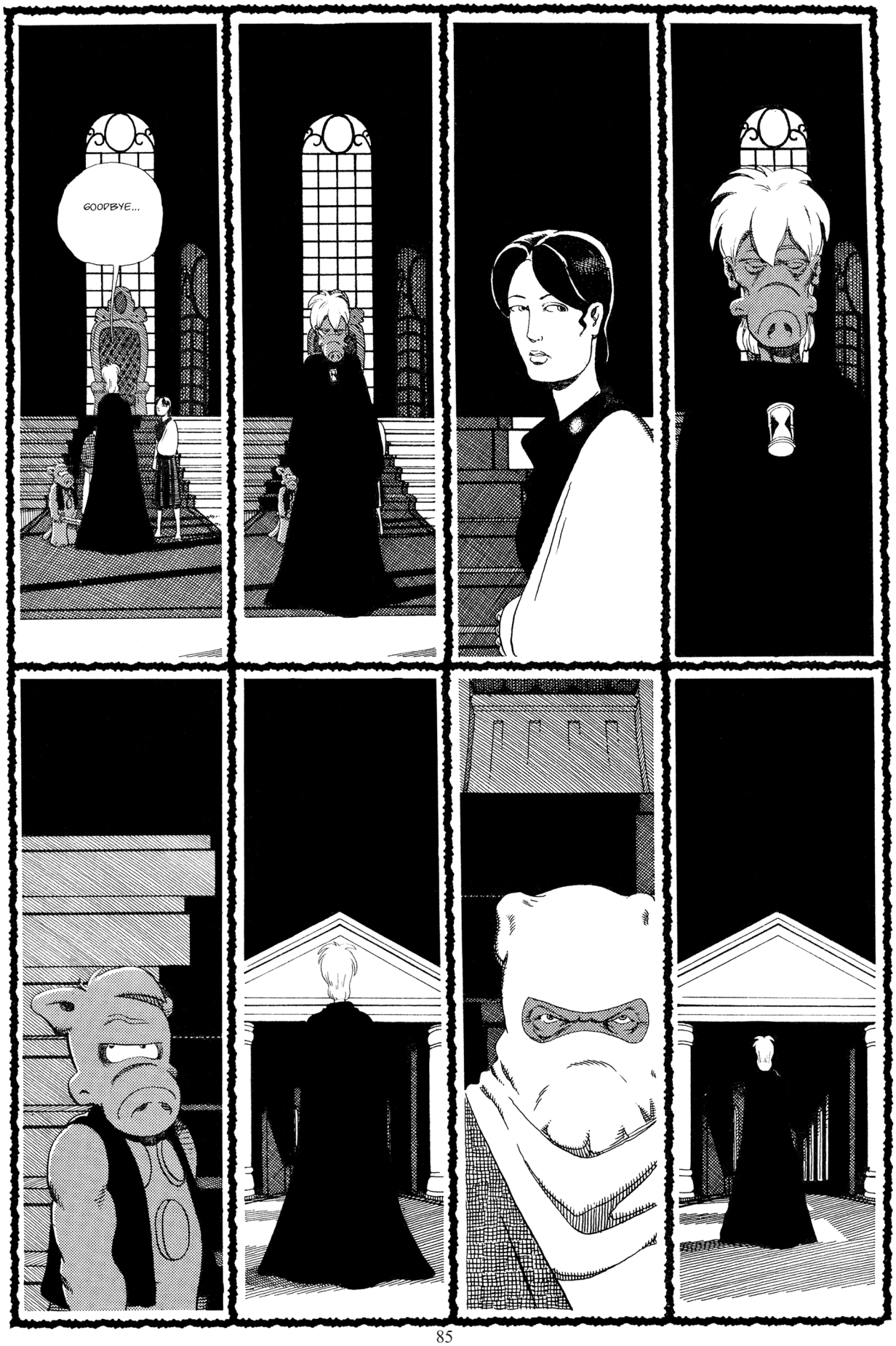

CEREBUS?
WHAT.
YOU?
YOU, I'VE NEVER KNOWN.
I'VE WATCHED YOUR EVERY MOVE... LISTENED TO YOUR EVERY WORD.
I'VE SHARED YOUR EVERY WAKING THOUGHT
THERE HASN'T BEEN A DAY GO BY THAT YOU HAVEN'T SURPRISED ME.

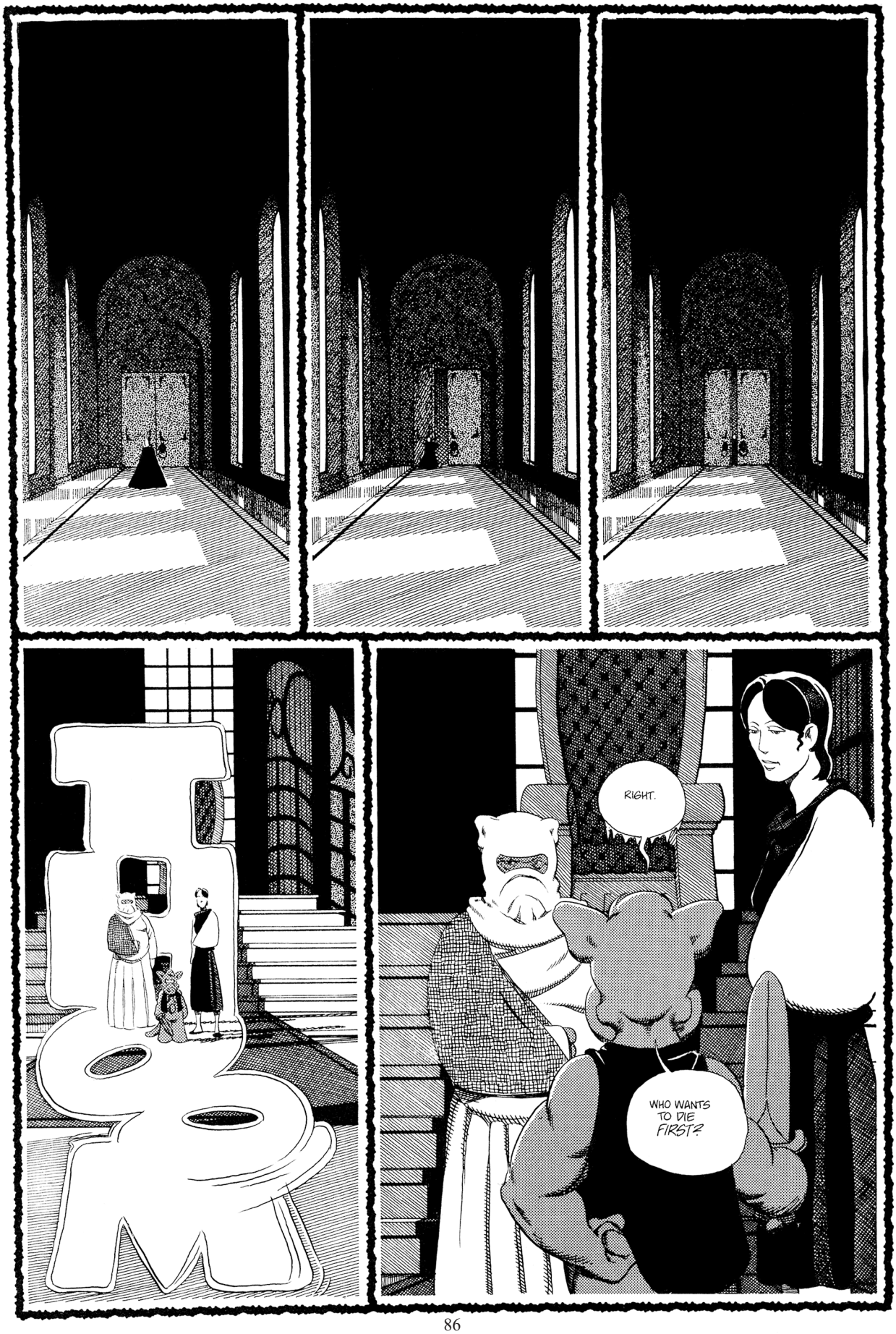

WE AARDVARKS...
WE ARE ALL OF US DIFFERENT... APART FROM... SIMILARITIES IN OUR APPEARANCE
WE HAVE... POWERS. ALTHOUGH THE TERM IS REALLY INADEQUATE AS DESCRIPTIONS GO...
POWER IMPLIES CONTROL OR... RATHER... THAT IS THE COMMON INFERENCE DRAWN.
WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN MY FUR TURNED PURPLE FOR SEVERAL SECONDS ONE DAY...
FOR TWO DAYS WHEN I WAS TWENTY, MY HANDS WERE DETACHABLE
I COULD REMOVE THEM AND AFFIX THEM TO ANY JOINT ON MY BODY.
CIRIN HAS HAD A SMALL HEAD THAT RESEMBLES YOU GROWING IN HER LEFT ARM-PIT FOR SEVERAL MONTHS
YOU SNEEZED FIRE, ONCE.
THESE COULD BE DESCRIBED AS 'POWERS' ONLY IN THE VERY LOOSEST CONNOTATION OF THE WORD
AS I'M SURE YOU WILL AGREE
SINCE THINGS AND PEOPLE HAVE A TENDANCY TO CHANGE IN PROXIMITY TO US, WE ARE DRAWN TO THOSE FIELDS WHERE THIS IS AN ASSET. POLITICS, RELIGION, THE ARTS, THE MILITARY.
WE ARE AN ALLEGORY OF POWER IN OUR WAY. WHAT LEADER, WHAT WOULD-BE MESSIAH, WHAT MILITARY 'GENIUS' HAS NOT GAZED, IN HORROR, AT THE RESULTS OF HIS 'GOOD WORKS'?
IT IS AS IF THEY CHANGED COLOUR... OR SNEEZED FIRE... AND IN RESPONSE
THE WORLD THEY SOUGHT TO INFLUENCE WENT MAD AND CHANGED ITSELF INTO A FORM THEY DEPLORE
REALITY MOCKS ALL ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL IT,
AND MOCKS, AS WELL, THE WOULD-BE CONTROLLER.
THE MESSAGE IS IMPLICIT
THE ONLY PERSON YOU CAN CONTROL
IS YOURSELF.
TO ATTEMPT TO CONTROL ANYONE OR ANYTHING ELSE IS TO DON THE VESTMENTS OF THE FOOL.

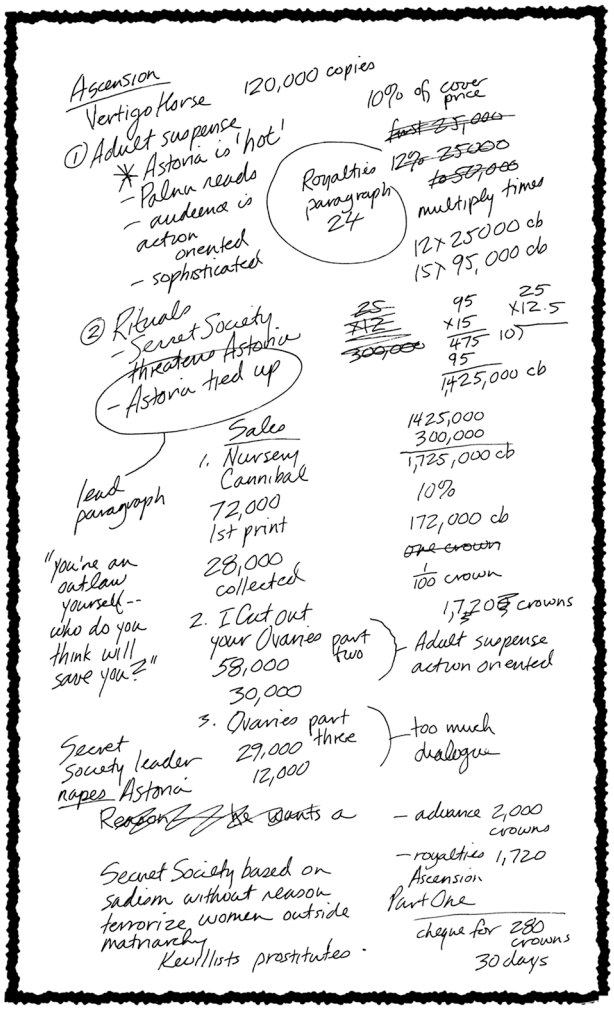

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY THAT THREE AARDVARKS HAVE EXISTED SIMULTANEOUSLY
IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE, YOU ARE... CAUGHT BETWEEN MYSELF AND CIRIN...
I HAVE, AS MY SOLE AMBITION, TO LIVE OUT MY REMAINING YEARS
WITHOUT BRINGING HARM TO MYSELF OR ANY OTHER
THAT MORNING, OUT FRONT OF DINO'S CAFE
WHEN DINO REMARKED, 'BEAUTIFUL DAY'
AND YOUR WEEKS OF CATATONIC INTROSPECTION MERGED WITHIN YOU...
AND YOU EXPERIENCED WHAT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS 'THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING'
YOU TOUCHED, HOWEVER BRIEFLY, THE STATE OF EXISTENCE I PURSUE.
COMPARE HOW YOU FELT, AT THAT MOMENT, WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE AS PRIME MINISTER AND POPE
HAVING LEGIONS OF SOLDIERS AT YOUR COMMAND, A ROOMFUL OF GOLD, THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH OVER MANY PEOPLE ...
A VAST AND INTIMIDATING RESIDENCE— EMPTY... COLD... IMPERSONAL
SURROUNDED ALWAYS BY COVETOUS, SCHEMING, WOULD-BE USURPERS
DID ANY OF THAT... FOR EVEN A SINGLE MOMENT...
...BRING YOU A MOMENT'S PEACE THAT WOULD COMPARE WITH THAT GLORIOUS, SUN-DRENCHED MORNING?


IF YOU CAN'T SEE THE FOLLY IN YOUR OWN LIFE, THEN CONSIDER CIRIN
SHE BELIEVES THAT HER ONLY CHANCE FOR HAPPINESS IS TO REMAKE ESTARCION AND ITS PEOPLE IN HER OWN IMAGE
THE CLOSER SHE GETS TO HER OBJECTIVE, THE MORE IT RETREATS FROM HER.
SHE IS MORE MISERABLE NOW THAN EVER BEFORE, EVEN AS THE PRIZE IS WITHIN HER GRASP ...
YOU AND SHE SHARE THE ILLUSION THAT ABSOLUTE CONTROL CAN BE EQUATED WITH ABSOLUTE HAPPINESS
IF YOU DO ASCEND-- AND, IN SO DOING, UNITE THE EASTERN AND WESTERN CHURCHES UNDER YOU ...
CAN YOU NOT SEE THAT THE DOUBLING OF YOUR PREVIOUS WEALTH... AND POWER
CAN ONLY BRING YOU!
DOUBLE THE MISERY?
WELL
I'VE LINGERED HERE TOO LONG ALREADY.


I HAVE SUCCUMBED TO MANY TEMPTATIONS
DEPLORING WOULD-BE MESSIAHS, I HAVE ADOPTED THE TONE OF ARROGANT SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH CHARACTERIZES THEM.
I HAVE LOST MY TEMPER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY YEARS...
I HAVE INSULTED AND DEPRECATED MOST OF YOUR VERY STRONGLY-HELD BELIEFS
ALREADY.
ALREADY I CAN FEEL MY SENSE OF 'CONNECTEDNESS' -- MY PEACE OF MIND...
FALLING AWAY FROM ME.
AND SO...
BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE...
I WILL SIMPLY SAY...


GOODBYE...


RIGHT.
WHO WANTS TO DIE FIRST?


Ascension
Vertigo Horse
120,000 copies
10% of cover price
① Adult suspense
* Astoria is 'hot'
- Palma needs
- audience is action oriented
- sophisticated
Royalties paragraph 24
12% 25000
to 50,000
multiply times
12 x 25000 cb
15 x 95,000 cb
② Rituals
- Secret Society
threatens Astoria
- Astoria tied up
25
x12
300,000
95
x15
475
95
1,425,000 cb
25
x12.5
10)
lead paragraph
Sales
1. Nursery Cannibal
72,000
1st print
28,000
collected
1425,000
300,000
1,725,000 cb
10%
172,000 cb
one crown
1/100 crown
1,720 crowns
"you're an outlaw yourself -- who do you think will save you?"
2. I Cut out your Ovaries
58,000
30,000
part two
Adult suspense action oriented
3. Ovaries part three
29,000
12,000
too much dialogue
Secret Society leader rapes Astoria
Reason wants a
Secret Society based on sadism without reason terrorize women outside matriarchy
Kevill lists prostitutes.
- advance 2,000 crowns
- royalties 1,720
Ascension Part One
cheque for 280 crowns
30 days

Astoria pulled with all her might at the bright yellow cloth restraints which bound her wrists and ankles. The leering figure before her was handsome in a cold and heartless manner; he was unshaven, his thick brown hair arranged carelessly across his forehead.

"Pleasure and pain," he said simply, tracing the fingers of his left hand along *her inner thighs. In his other hand, he held a long knife with a weighted, jeweled handle. She attempted to wrench herself away from his loathsome touch, but not even the slightest movement was possible. She snarled obscenities into the gag which covered her mouth; the rough cloth reduced the words to incoherent and strangled noises of ineffective outrage.*

The fingers rose higher and still higher, finding the very center of her physical being, seeking, there, the small hard knot of nerve endings. The index finger found it and began pressing gently upon it, insistently enough so that the rhythmic pulsing within was evident to them both. Her assailant grinned wickedly, and the finger began to move in slow, circular...

"Mr. Reid?"

"Yes, Miss Van Stone?"

"Milieu is here. Shall I send her up?"

Victor sighed. He was not looking forward to this.

"Yes, Miss Van Stone. Send her up."



Milieu was clearly outraged on Victor's behalf. The thin worry line on her forehead (which was usually all but invisible) seemed chiseled by some otherworldly sculptor with more passion than talent. Her brown eyes smouldered, merging with the severity of her eyebrows, which made Victor grateful (not for the first time) that she was his friend and not his employer.

"And what did *you* say?" she demanded.

"I said I would do what I can," replied Victor, who felt no rage himself; who, in point of fact, felt nothing. He was seated at his desk, with an opened copy of *In Palnu's Shadow* and the sample chapter of *Forever Palnu* before him, as well as a notepad on which he was jotting random paragraphs and dialogue for *Ascension*. It was as if he had enrolled himself in a commercial writing course, Victor "*Palnu*" Reid 101, and was eagerly "cramming" for his final examination.

"I'm sorry?" said Victor, still lost in the dungeon beneath Willesden Square with Astoria and her as yet unnamed and motiveless captor.

"I said, what about Lillian and Elsie?" snapped Milieu.

"What about Cerebus ascending, for God's sake?"

"I have to..." (how had Carl Berger put it?) "...capitalize on the success of the *Palnu Trilogy* while it's still fresh in everyone's mind," explained Victor, "I have to keep my irons in the fire."

Actually, what Carl Berger had said was that Victor had to "strike while the iron was hot," and he had further attempted to dissuade Victor from accepting any outside assignments lest he find himself with "too many irons in the fire". Victor, of course, was new to the rarefied atmosphere of best-selling-reads jargon and could be forgiven the odd misquote or two. He was, as promised, doing what he could. "*Palnu Trilogy*?" asked Milieu, and then reiterated incredulously, "*Palnu TRILOGY*?!" Since when did that – and I quote – 'pile of smut-laden, mouth-breathing mindlessness' get elevated to the status of a *trilogy?*"

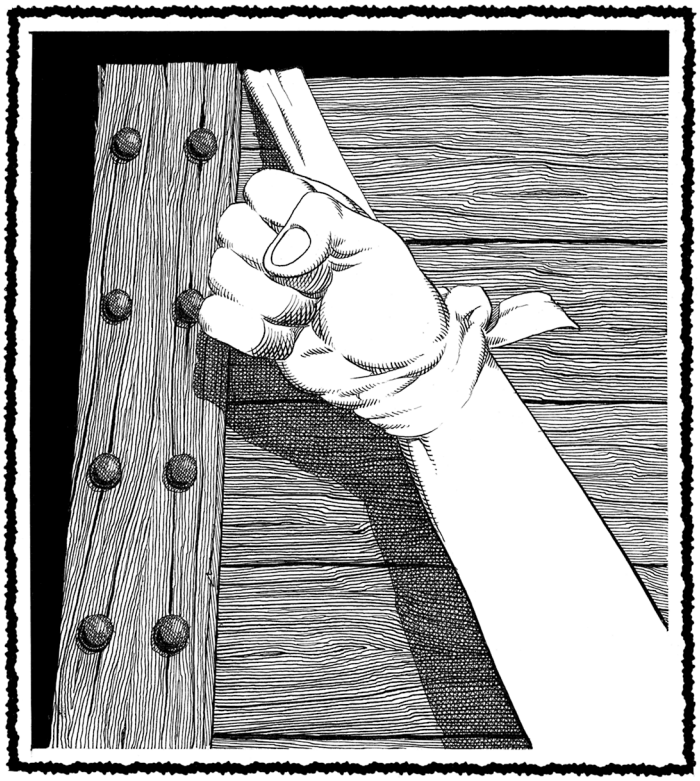
Victor, without raising his head, shrugged in a manner which was both helpless and eloquent.

"So, if Lillian and Elsie and Cerebus ascending aren't in *Ascension*, then what is, for God's sake?"

Victor toyed with the idea of showing Milieu the recently completed paragraph. He then considered saying that there was very little in *Ascension* – the new *Ascension* – which could be construed as benefitting any deity, or any individual apart from Mr. Chartwell at the bank or perhaps Victor's accountant and creditors. Instead he held up the sample *Forever Palnu* chapter.

The sound of exasperation which issued forth in a cloud of cigarette smoke left no doubt as to Milieu's reaction. Victor still couldn't bring himself to look at her.

"I'll get back to it," he said. "I just misunderstood what Vertigo Horse was looking for. If I do it right, *Ascension* can be very profitable. The way I see it..." (what was it Carl Berger had said?) "...if I can write something that appeals to Vertigo Horse's target customer, I can reach a much wider audience. I can make the same points about Cirinism and Kevillism, but if I give the readers what they want as well, I can have a much greater impact. Also, because I don't have to worry about subtext, subtleties and an overarching theme, I'll be able to write faster. I could finish *Ascension* in two years, maybe less. Once I'm financially secure, I can write exactly what I want to write about without having to worry if it sells or not. People



aren't..." (how had Carl Berger put it?) "...people aren't interested in what happened a hundred years ago. Yesterday's potatoes are yesterday's news." (Victor was unsure if that was the correct phrase, or if he had inverted it.) "The readers want something modern: something that applies to their own lives and their own interests. Astoria. Cirin. Violence. They want..."

Victor had, unfortunately, exhausted the thematic complexities which would constitute the new, more modern *Ascension*. Astoria. Cirin. Violence. It was the essence of the Vertigo Horse line. It was couched in exalted terminology: "sophisticated adult suspense", "challenging content", "action-oriented", "fast-paced storytelling," but these were largely euphemisms for "literate pornography" and "mindless violence". It was the essence of his *Palnu Trilogy* (Milieu was right, of course; even the sobriquet "trilogy"" amounted to a pretentious rationalisation). And now it would be the essence of *Ascension* as well. He could picture the advertising copy on the back cover of each installment: "Astoria! Cirin! Violence!"

Victor stared glumly at the large manila envelope on the floor which contained the ragtag quilt of *Ascension*'s brief second incarnation: Milieu's research and some of his best prose grafted onto a short story he had never cared for. It also contained the amputated, truncated fragments and snippets of Milieu's white notebook. He was afraid that, at any moment, she would ask for it back. He was afraid to show her all that remained of their hours, days of hard work: paper fragments, pages scored with rectangular windows where Victor had committed his desperate acts of literary surgery.

The silence, Victor realised, had stretched between them as this reverie had seized hold. He couldn't remember what he had been saying. He had four days to come up with a finished installment. He should have been at the Vertigo Horse offices by now. The sands in his mental hourglass were slipping away. He needed to resolve their discussion (argument?), and quickly.

"When I'm done." Victor said quietly, "when I'm finished *Ascension*. I promise you we'll go right back to work on...on..."

He realised that he didn't know what to call it. It wasn't *Ascension* – not anymore. It was not only mutilated, it was not only homeless (having been denied residence at Vertigo Horse), it was also nameless. They would just have to rename it, Victor decided. Some day he would tell Milieu the whole story and they would work on it together, assembling the various jigsaw pieces over a week or two, and, once it was back to its original form, they could just pick up where they had left off. As soon as *Ascension* was finished.

He picked up the notebook in which the new *Ascension* was taking shape and was reminded of the time that was passing.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to get you to proofread this one," Victor said.

Milieu ventured no reply and, after several seconds, he continued.

"Since there's so little time before the printing deadline, Mrs. Potts – Karen – wants me to do most of the writing in the office, so she and Mr. Berger – Carl – can...make suggestions, smooth out any rough edges before it's typeset. They have proofreaders on staff who will be working...working for me."

This was a gross distortion of the truth, Victor knew. His ego had been scraped raw in Berger's office and needed some manner of balm, even if it meant lying to Milieu.

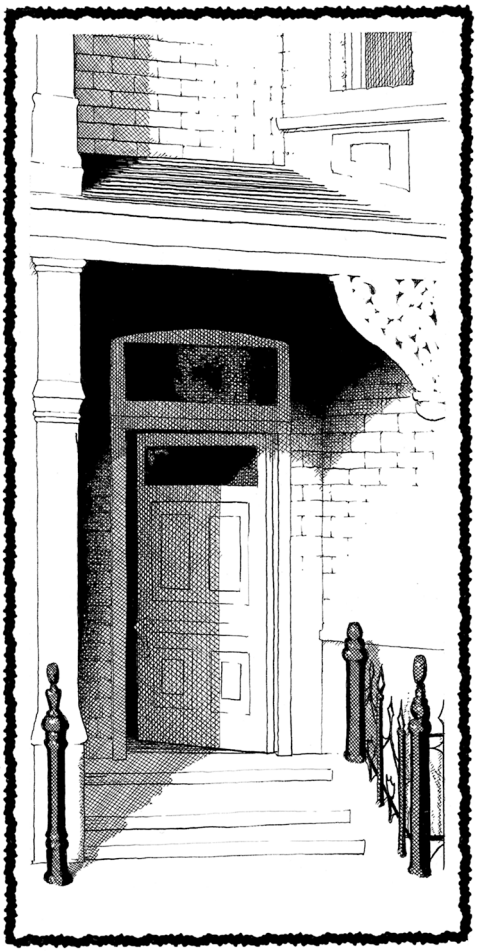
"Oh, don't worry, we'll assign you to a proofreader," Carl Berger had said. Victor would be assigned *to* a proofreader, as he had been assigned *to* an editor, as that editor had assigned him *to* her assistant. Victor wondered, grimly, how long it would be before he was assigned to the receptionist: emptying her wastebasket, running errands.

"I pushed for them to use you," Victor said, looking up at her for the first time, his lie lending him the needed strength. "I told them what a great help you've been to me these last few weeks. I told them how much I valued your opinion and that I thought you'd be a great asset to the project."

Of course, Victor had said none of this. He had meekly nodded his acquiescence at every turn, smiling enthusiastically. He waited for his words to create the desired effect. Milieu's expression was unchanged and Victor felt himself bristling inwardly. Of course, what he had just said was a complete fabrication, but in its context, it raised Milieu to the level of a (what was the term Carl Berger had used?) key player. It put her very nearly on an equal footing with the likes of Mrs. Potts – Karen – and Mr. Berger – Carl. And there she sat, completely expressionless, as if his gallant championing of her professional cause were...meaningless.

"We will work on...this other thing. I promise you that," said Victor, smiling, granting her the concession from his lofty perch in the Vertigo Horse hierarchy. "As soon as *Ascension* is completed."

"Sure, Victor," she said, grinding out a freshly lit cigarette. She stood then, and Victor noticed that she hadn't removed her coat, that her purse still hung suspended from one shoulder.



"I can see you have a lot of work to do," she added. "Don't get up; I can let myself out."

Victor stood, in spite of himself. His internal hourglass forgotten for the moment, he was aware, only, that Milieu was leaving. He did have a lot of work to do. Their discussion (argument?) had ended. He would be at the Vertigo Horse offices within the hour. Still, he cast about for something, anything that he could say or do. Milieu was leaving.

"I could have Carl send you copies of *Ascension* as it comes out, if you like," he said, hurriedly.

He knew this was doubtful, if not impossible. Perhaps, he thought, he could find a stray Vertigo Horse envelope around the offices, or offer to buy some. There was really no way for Milieu to know that it was Victor who was sending them to her and not Carl Berger. He could get his housekeeper to address the envelope (Milieu would recognize his handwriting). He could mail the copies from somewhere in the Lower City near the Vertigo Horse offices, so that the postmark would...

"No," she said, her back to him, framed by the doorway, her waist-length hair the only feature visible to him. "No, I don't think so," she added, and then, after a short pause, "Thank you, anyway." She turned, perceptibly, to her right, though not quite far enough for Victor to see her face.

"Take care of yourself, Victor," she said. And then she was gone.

Victor listened as she descended the short, narrow stairway. The sound of her footsteps vanished as she crossed the living-room carpet only to reemerge briefly as she crossed the parquet flooring of the entryway. The sounds of traffic and voices were audible for a moment and then they were gone; they were all that signaled to Victor the opening and closing of the front door.

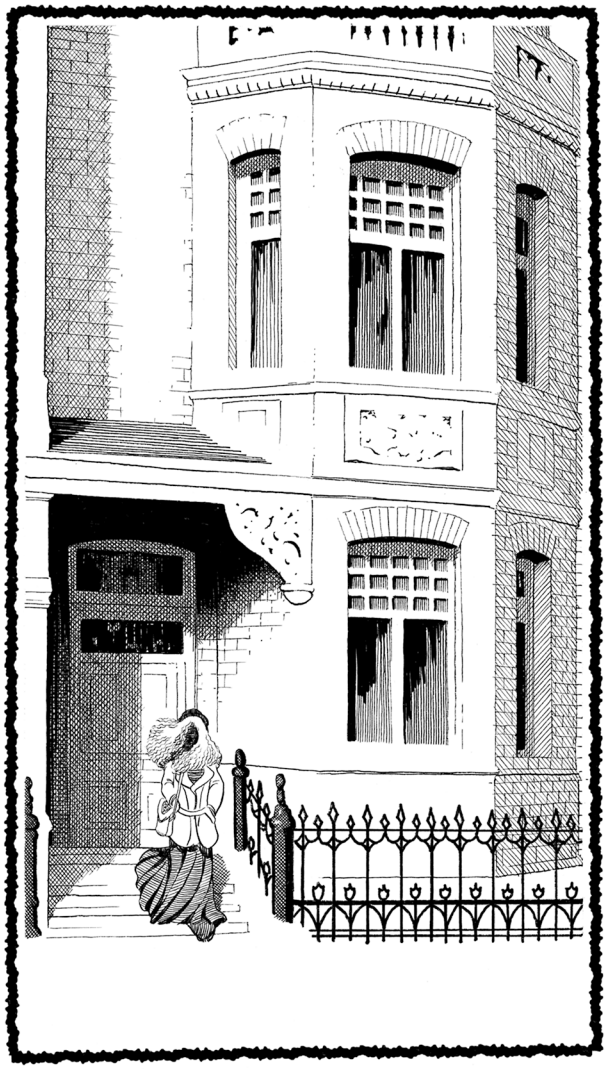
For several minutes, Victor listened to the silence, not really knowing what (if anything) he hoped or expected to hear. At last, he slowly sank into his chair, time and the Vertigo Horse offices briefly forgotten. His eyes settled on the small engraving of M. Zulli's *Ascension* cover propped up on one corner of his desk: Lady Howe (or was it Beth?) frozen in the act of wrenching open her robe. Beth (or was it Astoria?) uttering her single, wordless cry (of anger? pain? triumph?); it was a wordless cry which would echo and reecho, multiplied a hundred-thousandfold from racks and shelves and bins in reads stores across the length and breadth of Estarcion in a few weeks' time.

Of course, Astoria had short hair.

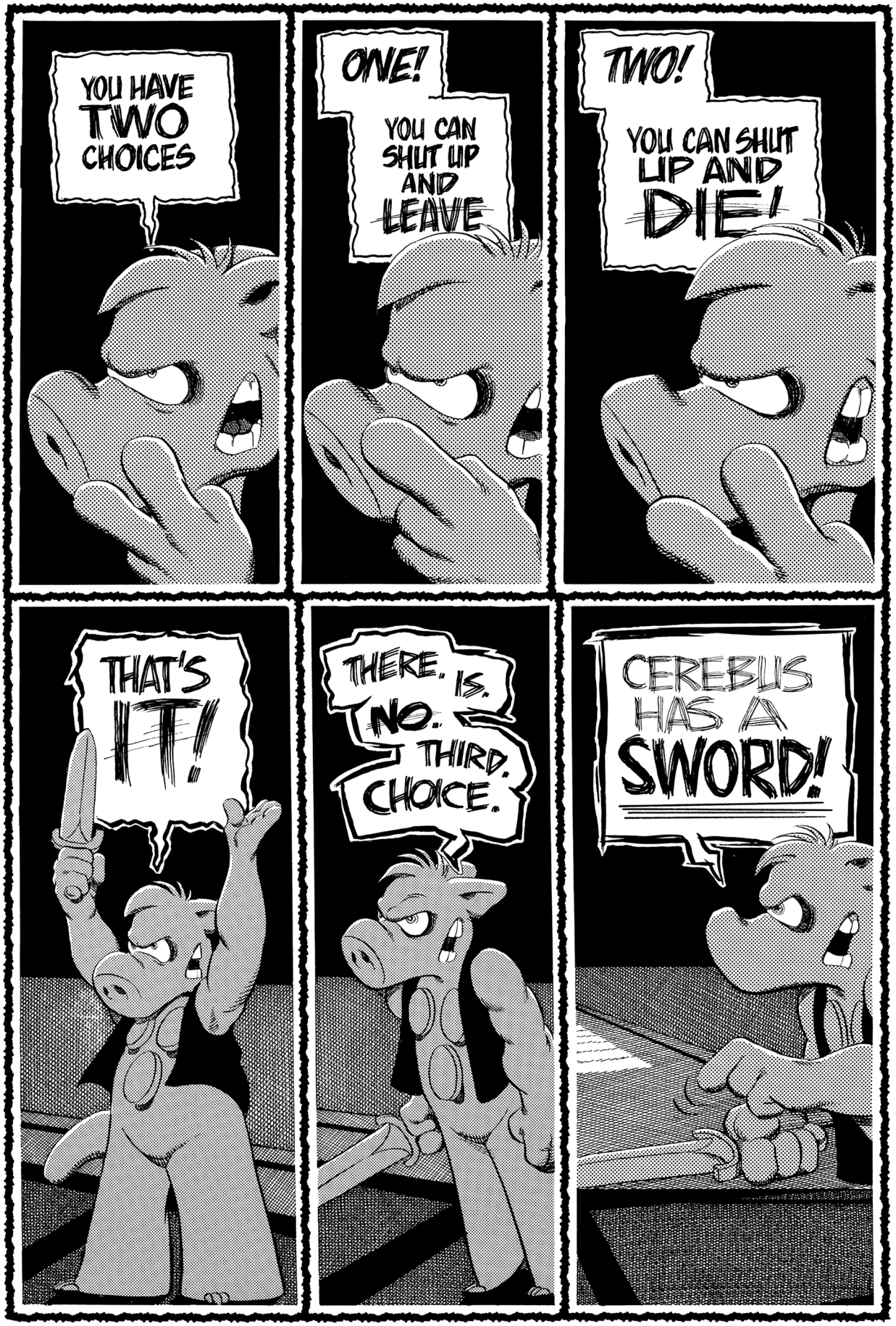
Everyone knew that.

Victor briefly considered contriving some plot device, some *deus ex machina* that would compel Astoria to don a long, curly, dark wig, tying the cover illustration and his text together. He decided, after a few moments of introspection, that it just didn't matter, really.

It just wasn't important.

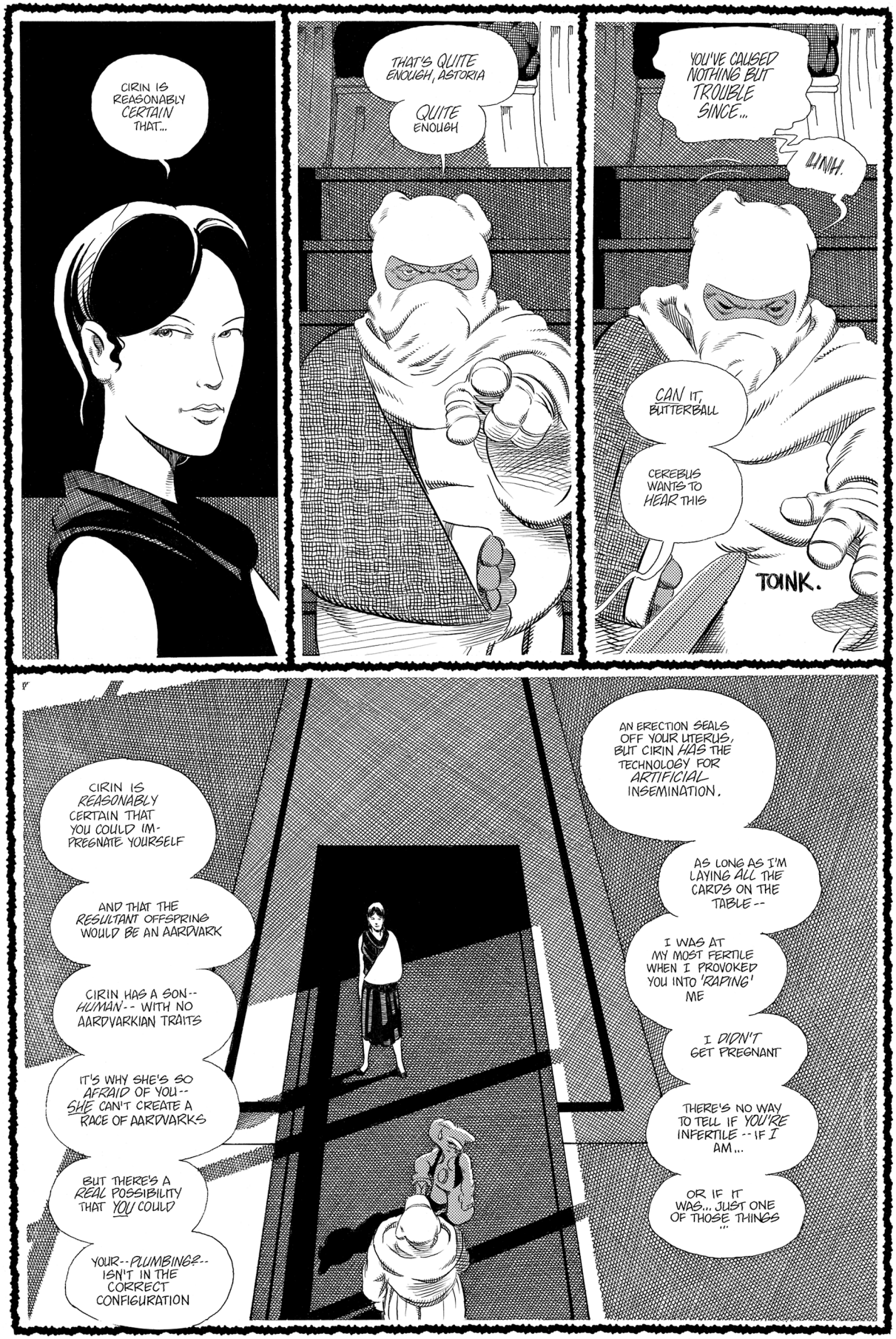



IT WON'T BE NECESSARY TO KILL ME.
I'M LEAVING AS WELL
FINE!
THEN CEREBUS CAN JUST
I HAVE A FEW THINGS TO SAY BEFORE I
NO!
NO.
MORE.
TALK!
STOMP
STOMP
TALK!
TALK!
TALK!
CEREBUS HAS HAD IT UP TO HERE WITH TALK!


YOU HAVE TWO CHOICES
ONE! YOU CAN SHUT UP AND LEAVE
TWO! YOU CAN SHUT UP AND DIE!
THAT'S IT!
THERE. IS. NO. THIRD. CHOICE.
CEREBUS HAS A SWORD!


CEREBUS HAS YOU AT HIS MERCY
YOU'RE AN HERMAPHRODITE
AN HERMAPHRODITE
YOU HAVE BOTH MALE AND FEMALE GENITALIA
EVEN MORE INTERESTING-- YOU HAVE BOTH MALE AND FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS


YOU JUST MADE THAT UP.
UH-UH.
THAT FUR-COVERED POCKET BETWEEN YOUR LEGS
WHERE YOUR PENIS SITS WHEN YOU AREN'T ERECT OR URINATING...
IT'S A VAGINA.


CIRIN IS REASONABLY CERTAIN THAT...
THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH, ASTORIA
QUITE ENOUGH
YOU'VE CAUSED NOTHING BUT TROUBLE SINCE...
UNH.
CAN IT, BUTTERBALL
CEREBUS WANTS TO HEAR THIS
TOINK.
CIRIN IS REASONABLY CERTAIN THAT YOU COULD IMPREGNATE YOURSELF
AND THAT THE RESULTANT OFFSPRING WOULD BE AN AARDVARK
CIRIN HAS A SON-- HUMAN-- WITH NO AARDVARKIAN TRAITS
IT'S WHY SHE'S SO AFRAID OF YOU-- SHE CAN'T CREATE A RACE OF AARDVARKS
BUT THERE'S A REAL POSSIBILITY THAT YOU COULD
YOUR--PLUMBING?-- ISN'T IN THE CORRECT CONFIGURATION
AN ERECTION SEALS OFF YOUR UTERUS, BUT CIRIN HAS THE TECHNOLOGY FOR ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION.
AS LONG AS I'M LAYING ALL THE CARDS ON THE TABLE--
I WAS AT MY MOST FERTILE WHEN I PROVOKED YOU INTO 'RAPING' ME
I DIDN'T GET PREGNANT
THERE'S NO WAY TO TELL IF YOU'RE INFERTILE--IF I AM...
OR IF IT WAS... JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS ...


PO WAS RIGHT
IF I'M HONEST WITH MYSELF, I'VE ONLY EVER WANTED POWER FOR ITS OWN SAKE...
OSTENSIBLY I WANTED TO DESTROY CIRIN
AS HER PROTEGÉ I CAME TO DESPISE HER AND THE VERY IDEA OF MOTHERHOOD.
I USED EVERYONE SHE KEPT TABS ON-- EVERYONE WHO SHE FELT WAS A THREAT TO HER...
I MARRIED LORD JULIUS
SOLELY TO SET UP A KEVILLIST EMPIRE FROM WITHIN PALNU...
I SEDUCED ARTEMIS AND USED HIM TO EXECUTE MATRIARCHAL SYMPATHISERS
I SEDUCED HER SON AND MADE HIM MY GLORIFIED ERRAND BOY...
WHEN YOU TURNED UP IN IEST, I ENGINEERED YOUR RISE TO POWER
I SURROUNDED YOU WITH KEVILLISTS AND OUR SYMBOLS
ULTIMATELY, I EVEN BECAME THE WESTERN PONTIFF...
A SHORT WHILE AGO, THE ENTIRE CITY BOWED DOWN TO ME-- HAILED ME AS THE MESSIAH
JUST LOOK.
I HAVEN'T EVEN MADE A DENT IN HER
POWER.
IT WAS MY PROXIMITY TO YOU THAT MADE EVERYTHING... HAPPEN
I COULDN'T DIRECT IT AND I COULDN'T CONTROL IT...
DOCUMENTS CHANGED BEFORE MY EYES WHEN YOU WERE AROUND...
I'D SIT AND STARE AT THE WORDS AND GRADUALLY, I'D BE CONVINCED THAT THEY HAD ALWAYS SAID WHAT THEY SAID
BUT I KNEW IT WASN'T TRUE.
EVERYTHING FELL INTO PLACE AROUND YOU-- BUT THE MOMENT YOU MOVED ON...
IT ALL FELL BACK INTO DISORDER AND CHAOS
THAT'S WHAT PO MEANT WHEN HE SAID THAT YOU CAN ONLY CONTROL YOURSELF
POWER OVER OTHERS IS AN ILLUSION-- FOOLISHNESS
IF YOU CHOOSE POWER, YOU WILL RISE LIKE AN AIR BUBBLE IN A GLASS OF WATER ...
ALWAYS...


BUT YOU'LL ALWAYS FIND THE SAME THING YOU FOUND AS PRIME MINISTER
AND, I'M SURE, AS POPE:
IT'S A CHARADE
A STIFLING, INSULATING, FRUSTRATING PRACTICAL JOKE FROM TERIM...
OR TARIM.
DOES IT REALLY MATTER WHETHER IT'S A GOD
OR A GODDESS
WHO'S LAUGHING AT YOU?
THAT'S IT.
'NO MORE TALK'
YOU TWO HAVE FUN, OKAY?
PLAY NICE.


WHE-
WHERE WILL YOU GO?
JUST BEFORE I CAME HERE, I REMEMBERED A ...
DAYDREAM I USED TO HAVE
AS A LITTLE GIRL.
I WANTED TO BUILD MY OWN CHURCH -- OPEN TO THE SKIES
LIKE A COURTYARD, AVIARY, ANIMAL PRESERVE AND GARDEN ALL IN ONE
JUST THE... THOUGHT OF IT MADE ME FEEL AS IF A... GREAT WEIGHT HAD BEEN LIFTED FROM MY SHOULDERS
AND THEN I REALIZED IT DIDN'T HAVE TO STAY A DAYDREAM
I COULD HAVE IT AND A SMALL HOUSE BUILT... BY THE SPRING
EXACTLY THE WAY I'VE ALWAYS PICTURED THEM...

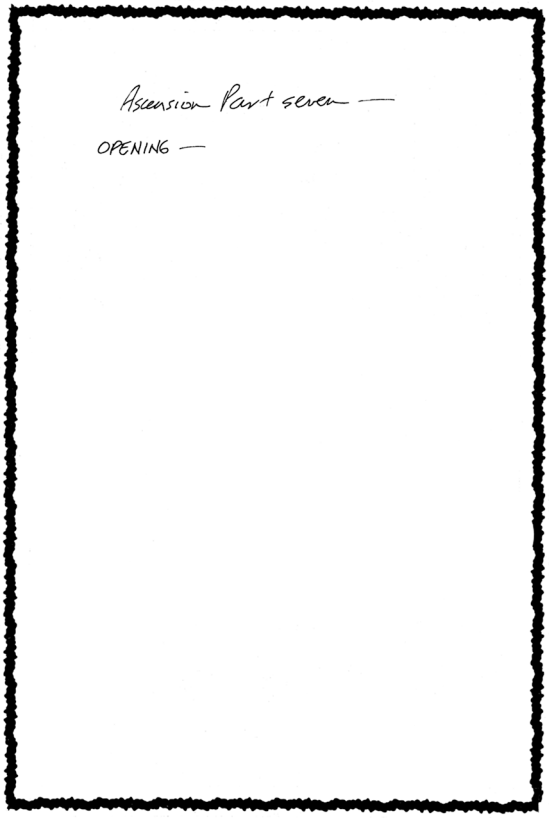

I HAVE SEVERAL THOUSAND CROWNS IN VARIOUS BANK ACCOUNTS
ENOUGH TO LAST ME THE REST OF MY NATURAL LIFE ...ENOUGH TO BUILD A LITTLE GIRL'S DAY DREAM - - PERFECT IN EVERY DETAIL
OF COURSE IT WON'T BE A CHURCH.
IT WILL BE A HOME.
MY
HOME.
WHO KNOWS?
I MIGHT EVEN TEACH MYSELF TO PLAY...
CHESS.


YOU KNOW, ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION ISN'T THE ONLY POSSIBILITY
ONCE I'M GONE
THERE'S NOTHING TO PREVENT THE TWO OF YOU FROM TRYING IT...
THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY.


"AND HER FINAL INCARNATION WAS FEMALE.....SHE HAD BECOME KAY$ARAH$ARAH"
"WHICH (IN AN ANCIENT PICTISH DIALECT MEANS)"
"SHE"
'RIVETING'
'GRIPPING'
'VIVID'
"OF-THE-IMPOSSIBLY-LARGE-HOOTERS"
"AND-THE-BIG-BOOK-WHICH-GIVES-AWAY-THE-ENDINGS-OF-ALL-STORIES"
"BUT-WHICH-CONTAINS-NO-'SPOILER-WARNINGS'-FOR-DON-THOMPSON"
"GOD AND GODDESS DESCENDED TOWARDS HER FROM VANAHEIM..."
"IT WAS THE END OF ALL DAYS..."
"THEIR VOICES WERE THE SWEETEST OF MUSIC..."
"WHISPERING TO HER..."
"SPAKING UNTO HER"
"AND SAYING"


LLING"
A
INNA
IGHTFUL
"IDIOT"
"YOU'RE ON THE WRONG PAGE"
HOCKING"
"AMAZING"
"UNEXPECTED"
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP
FLIP


YOU INSUFFERABLE LITTLE RODENT
DO YOU REALLY IMAGINE FOR ONE MOMENT FOR ONE INSTANT
JUST STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE
THAT'S ALL CEREBUS SAID!
JUST STAY RIGHT. THERE.
DON'T.
MOVE.


Ascension Part seven —
OPENING —



ictor Reid walked through the kitchen doorway, stiffly, clutching the current issue of Reads Informer in his left hand. His right hand bore traces and spatterings of strained spinach. His feet echoed with a hollow sound on the polished hardwood floor leading to the cream-coloured sitting room.

"Victor?"

The voice of his wife, Sarah, followed him, seeming to come from a great distance as he crossed to the spiral staircase which led up to the second floor. A subtle note of casual concern adhered to her enunciation of his given name. He reached the staircase and began to climb. Slowly.

"Victor?"

Now the second syllable climbed an octave or two, pregnant with mild confusion and amiable condescension, the tone an adult might use in addressing a child, wearing freshly laundered clothing, about to sit down in a mud puddle.

"Victor, you haven't finished feeding the baby!"

The sentence was a song, each word a note enhancing, emphasizing its predecessor. It was a concise melody, edged with imminent consequence. confrontational, accusatory...motherly, in a word. It demanded that a defense of his action be mounted, even as it implied that his action was indefensible. It was as ancient and as natural as childbirth itself, shaded as it was with pastel hues of martyrdom. It was the voice, the song of someone labouring under a great and solitary burden, unjustly borne. Victor reached the top of the stairs and walked along the antique T'Capmin carpet runner, past the unfinished guest bedrooms, the nursery, the sewing room, the playroom, toward the closed door of the smallest room in his vast and heavily mortgaged mansion.

"VICTOR!"

There was no music in this, merely the whiplash pull on the leash, the insistent command of a vengeful master contemplating a mute and recalcitrant slave. Sharp. Belligerent. Victor reached the door, opened it and stepped inside the small room, brilliantly illuminated by the morning sun.

"VICTOR REID, YOU ARE THE MOST SELFISH MAN I'VE EVER MET! YOU..."

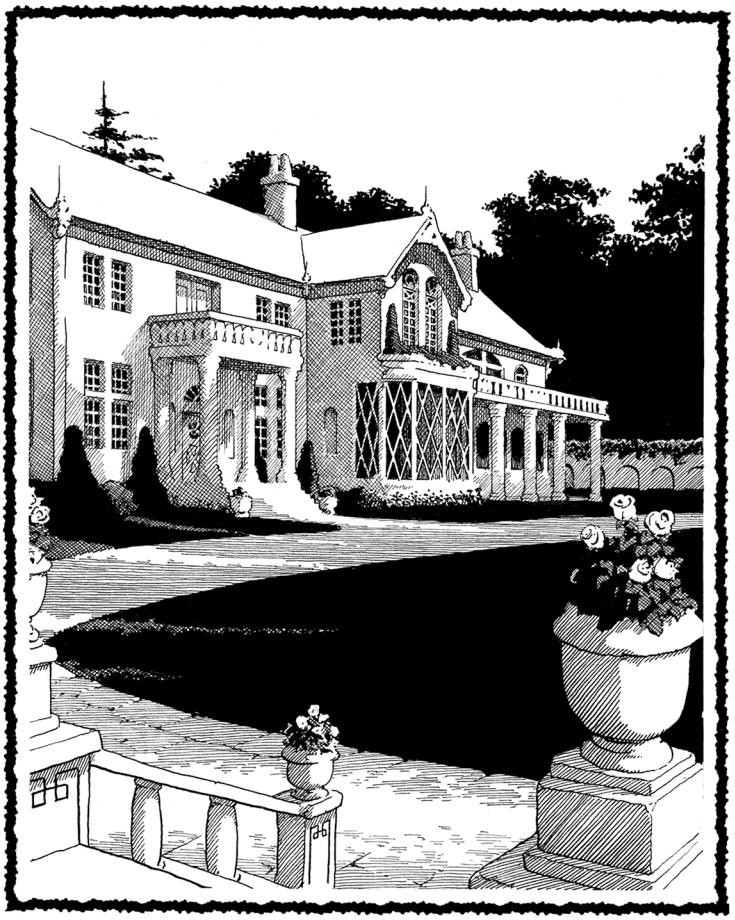
He closed the door and the sound became muffled, the words blurred and indistinct. The tone, however...the tone carried eloquently. Bad Victor. Shame on you, Victor.

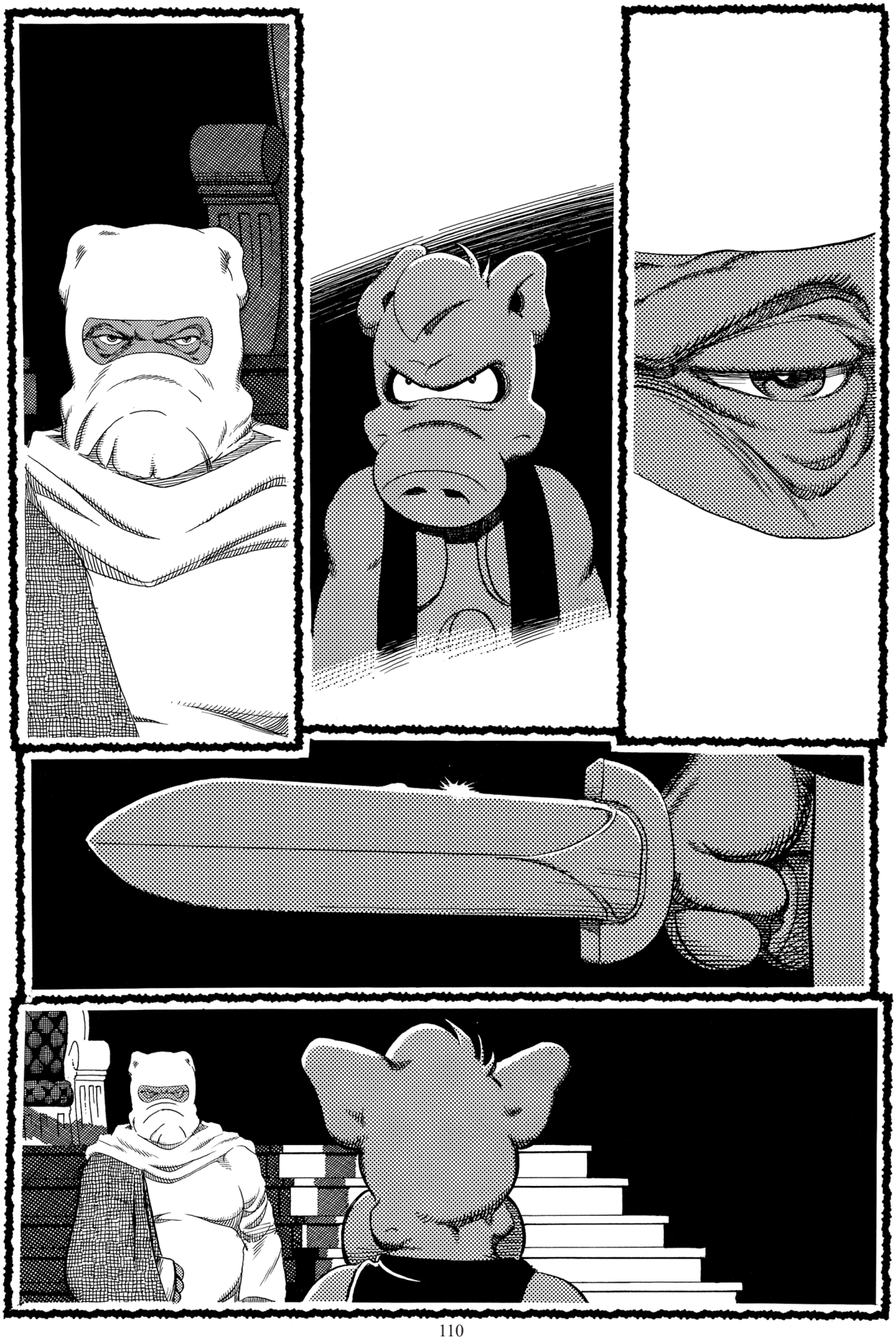
He pulled the chair back from his desk and sat down. He dropped the opened copy of the literary journal onto the writing surface. It landed at an angle complementary to his notebook, a notebook that he had opened eight (nine? ten?) months before. "*Ascension* part seven...opening..." was inscribed at the top of the first page. The rest of the page, the rest of the notebook, was empty. His eyes strayed, involuntarily, to the familiar Helvetica typeface of the *Reads Informer*'s letters section. It was the third time he had read the same paragraph. He knew, with a dreadful certainty, that it would not be the last.

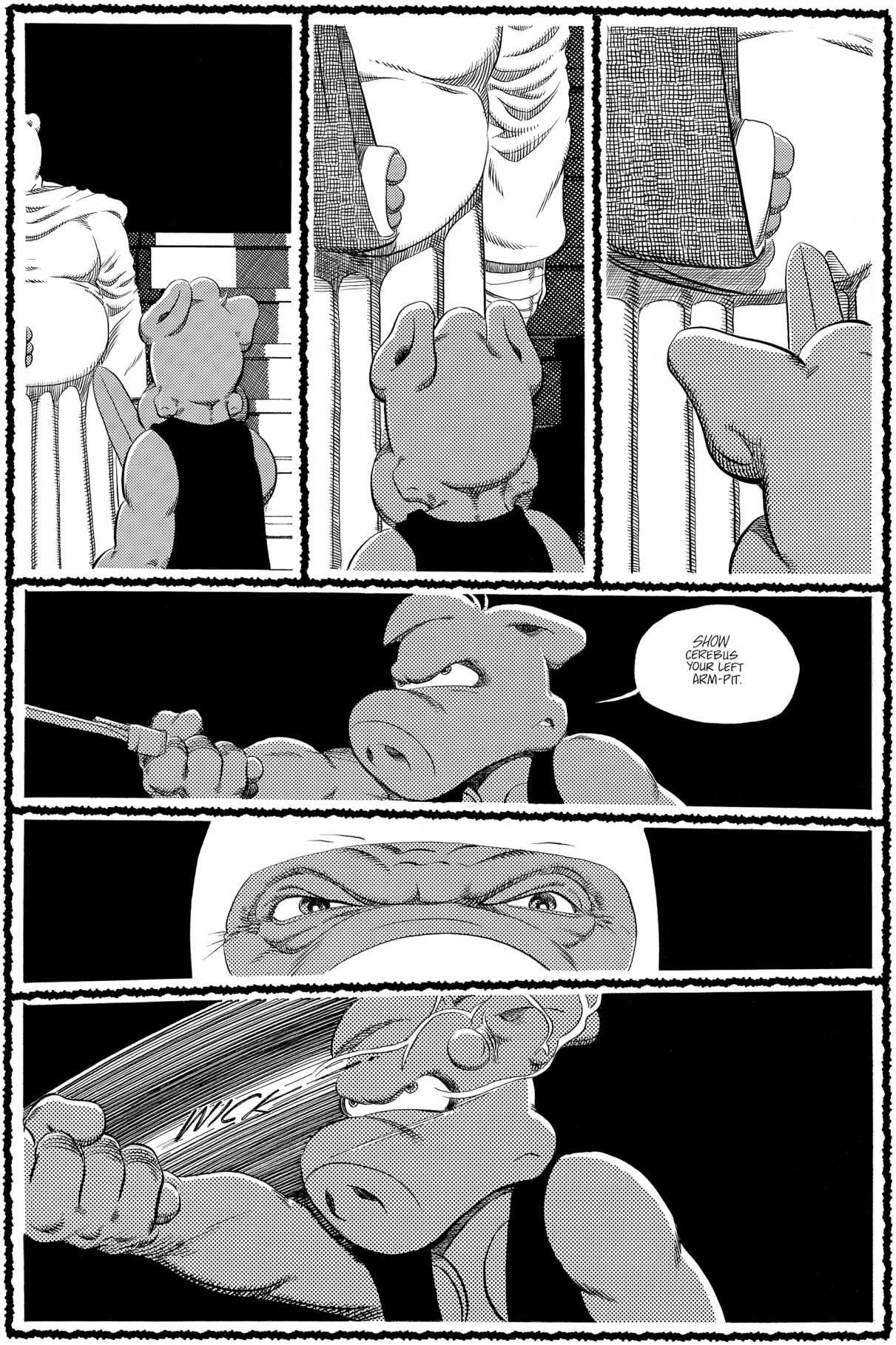
"Reid, of course, is simply the most recent example of a pattern which stretches back through the entire history of the Arts. One remembers him fondly, as a young lion of the printed page, drinking deeply at the well of divine inspiration, growing, molding himself and his work into something quite extraordinary and quite original. How sad to contemplate his descent from that pinnacle, that lofty perch which is achieved by so few, that summit from which a mature and focused talent speaks forth, alternately reverencing, indicting and intriguing the gods themselves. How sad to contemplate his current degraded circumstance as a fashionable literary 'name', his infrequent and unworthy current works, mere raw material for the copper-bit playhouses and the sordid appetites of their patrons: Vertigo Horse's shabby little money tree. But this sadness must be as nothing when measured against that of the muse or muses who informed his earlier works. 'Choose me,' cries the would-be artist in the blush of youth, fervently petitioning one or more of these Great Ladies for the golden gift that naught but they can bestow. 'Choose me and my life will be devoted to my art alone. I will be your slave, your lover, your husband. I will forsake all things and all people if you will only give me that glorious seed, beside which all else is sham and dross and nonsense.'"

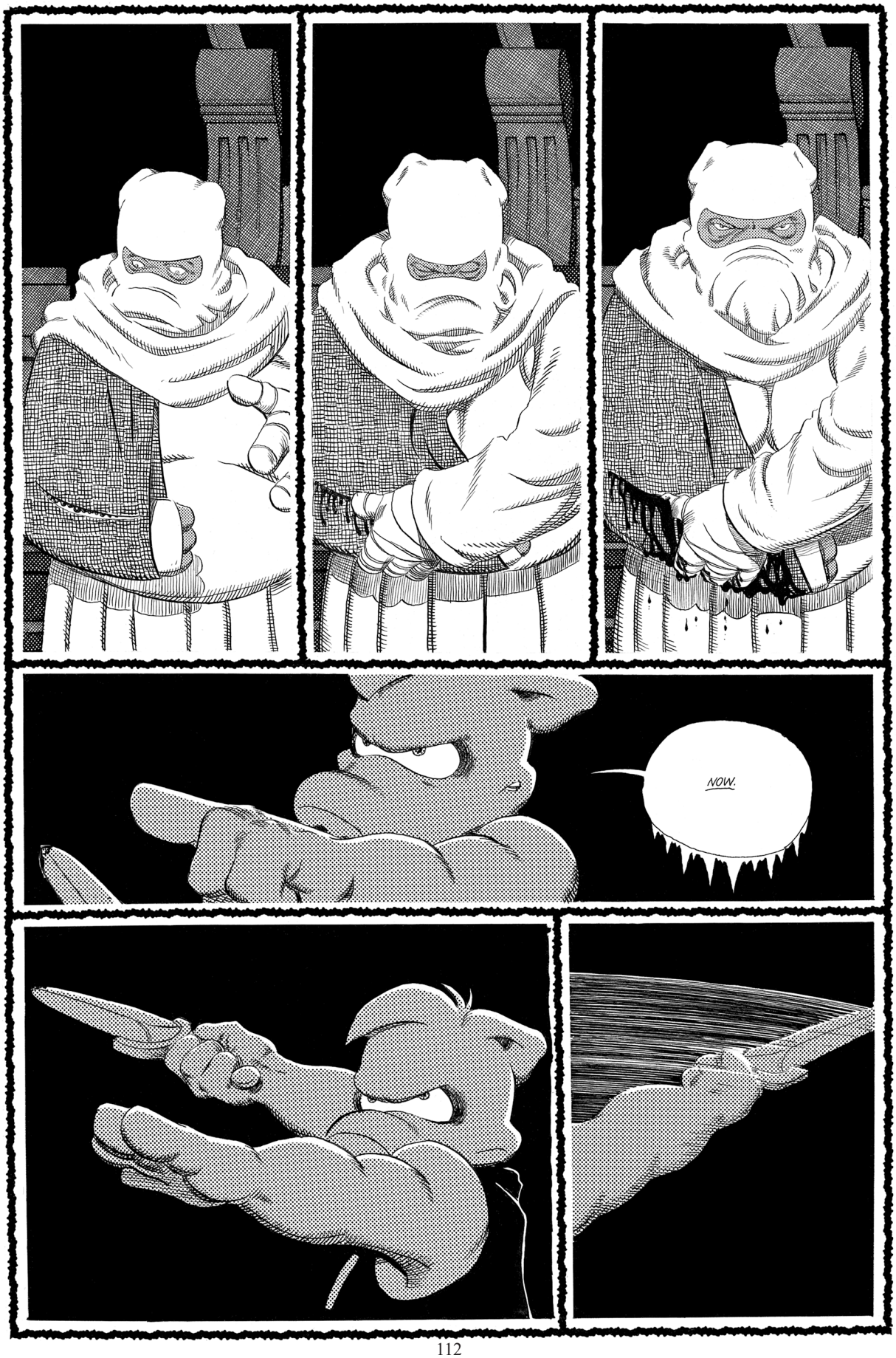
The ensuing paragraph was obscured entirely by the greenish-white smear of liquefied vegetables and his daughter's mucus. Victor trembled. Soon it would be time for him to return to the kitchen where (he knew) he and Sarah would argue. From the other side of the house, his daughter's crying rose, octave upon octave, swelling, soaring, compounding his crime, sealing his indictment, prefacing his sentence. He looked at his open notebook and thought, ruefully, about the nature of abandoned children. Sarah's rage and his daughter's misery filled his world, surrounding him, engulfing him, crushing him. He would have to go down and face the music, the song of aggrieved defiance which was but a single movement in the symphony of cold resentment: the sum of his life, the substance of his future. He would go down, yes. But not now. Not yet.

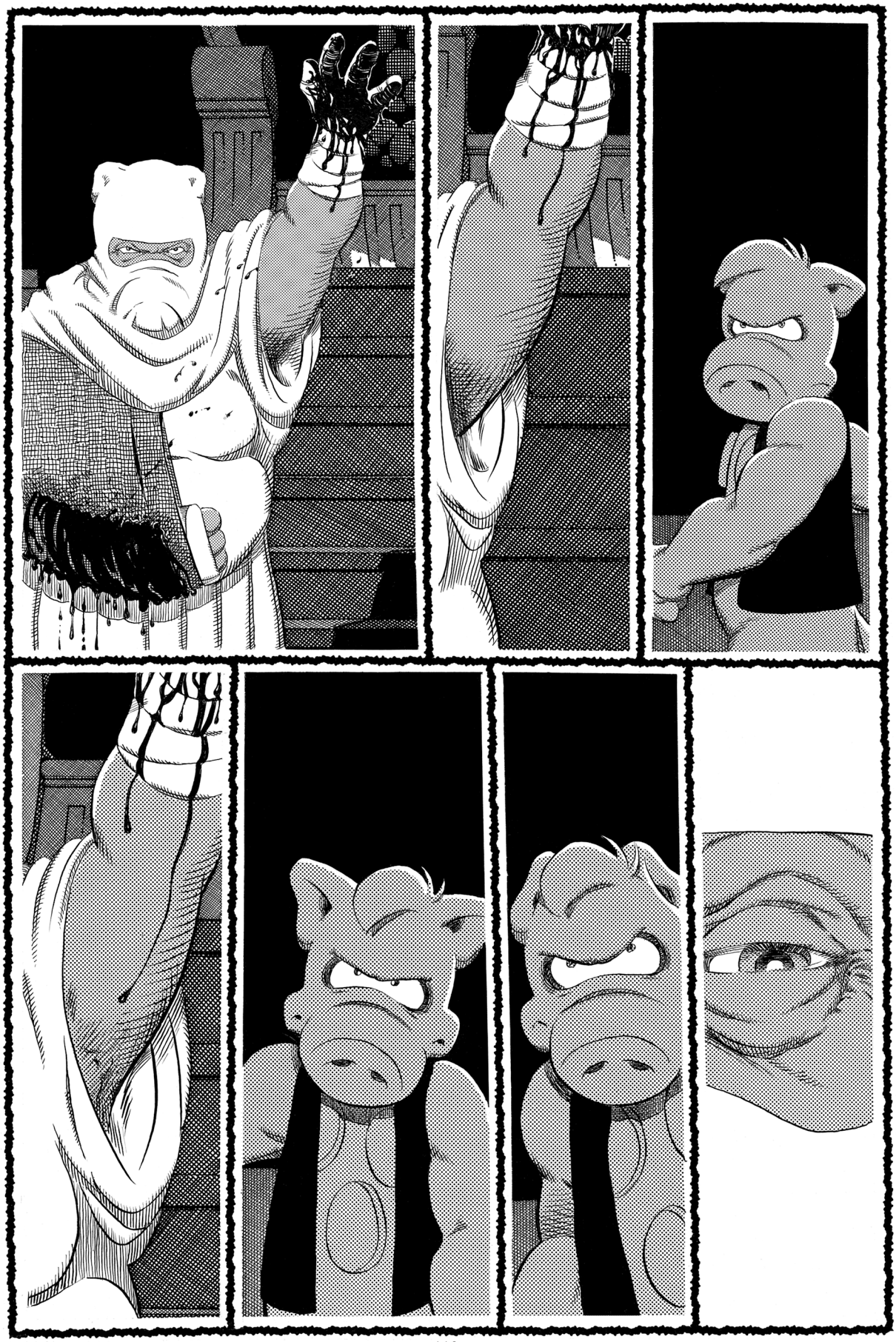
Victor pulled open the bottom drawer and withdrew a small bottle of cognac, and poured a large measure of it into a plain glass.

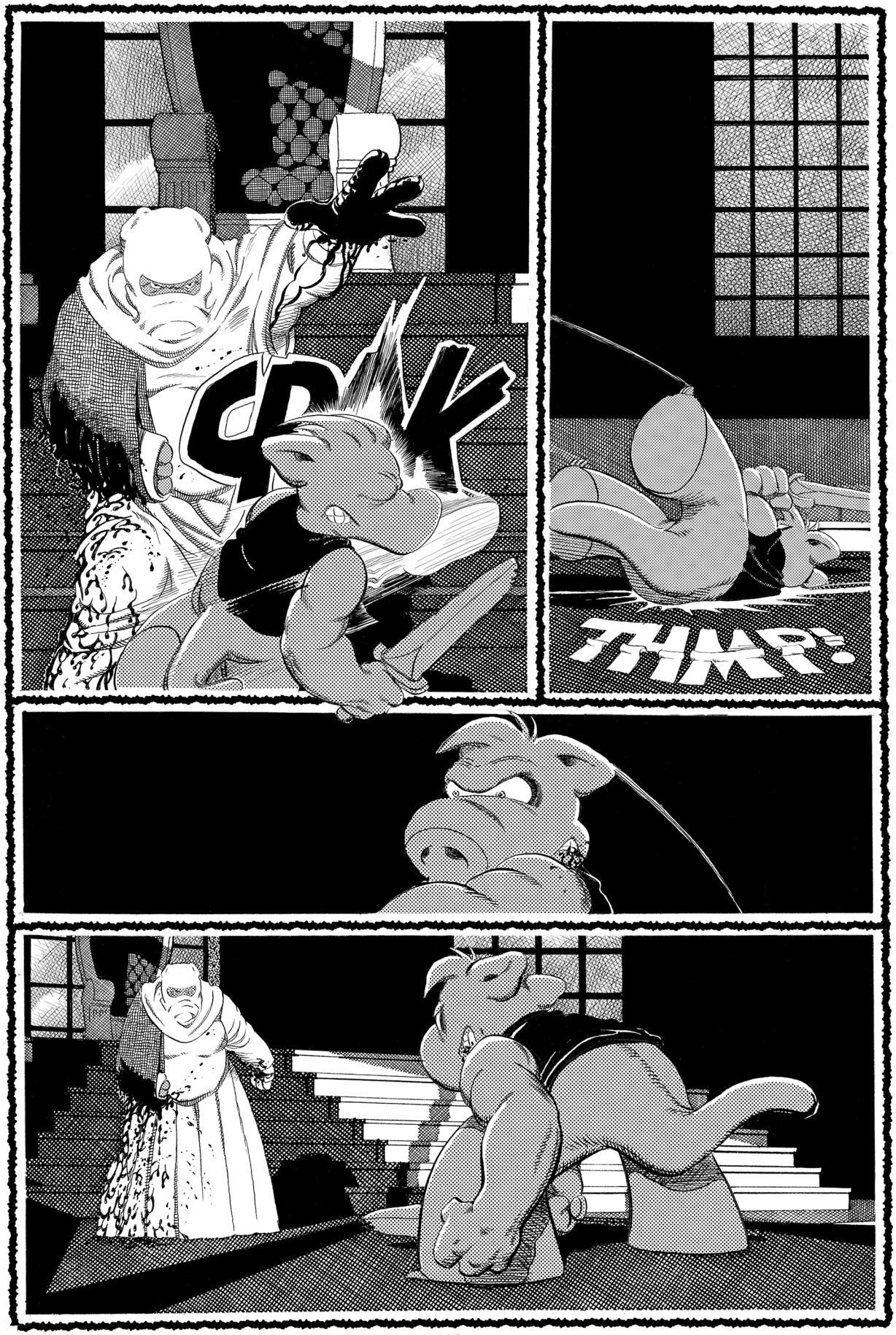





SHOW CEREBUS YOUR LEFT ARM-PIT.
WICK

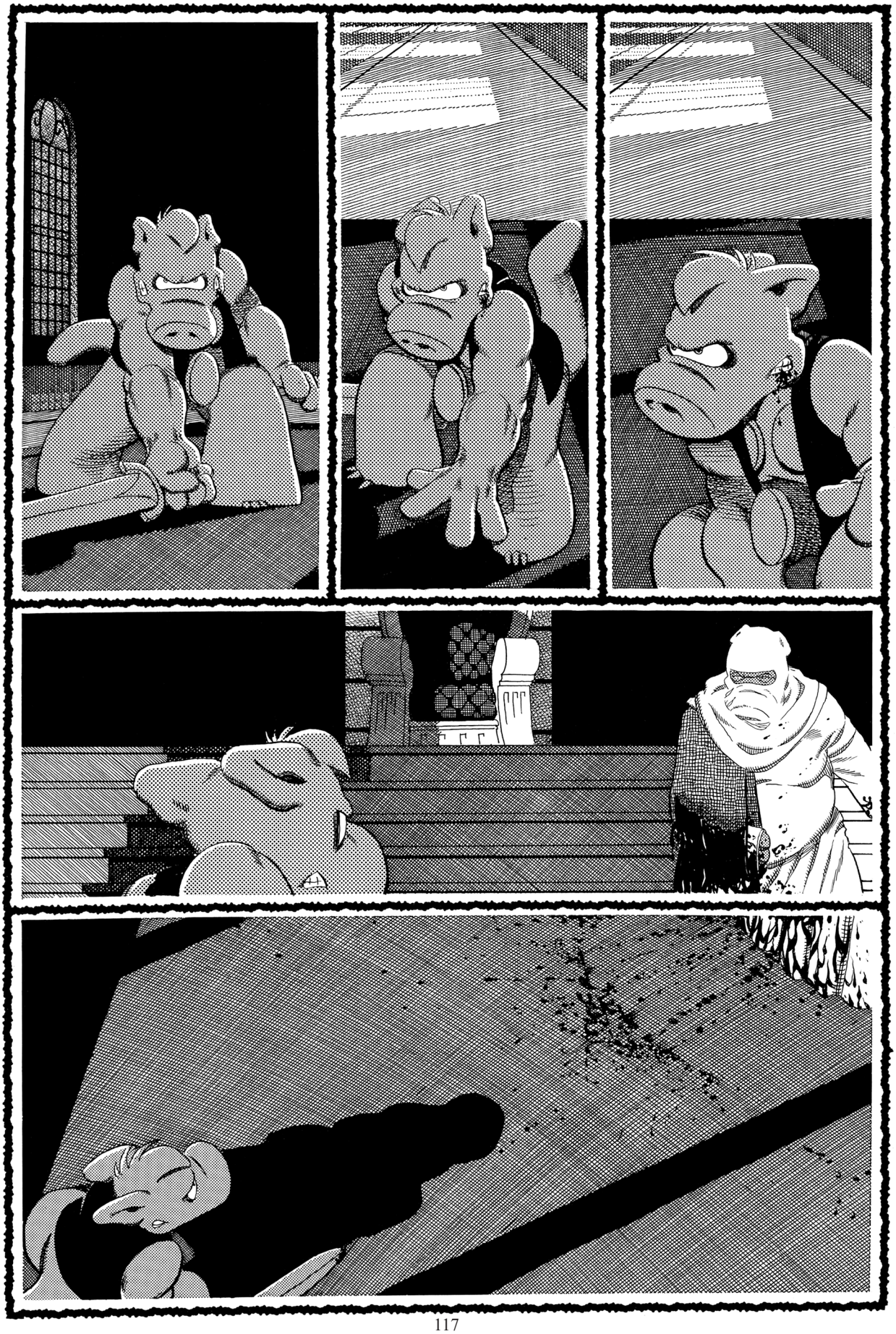

NOW.

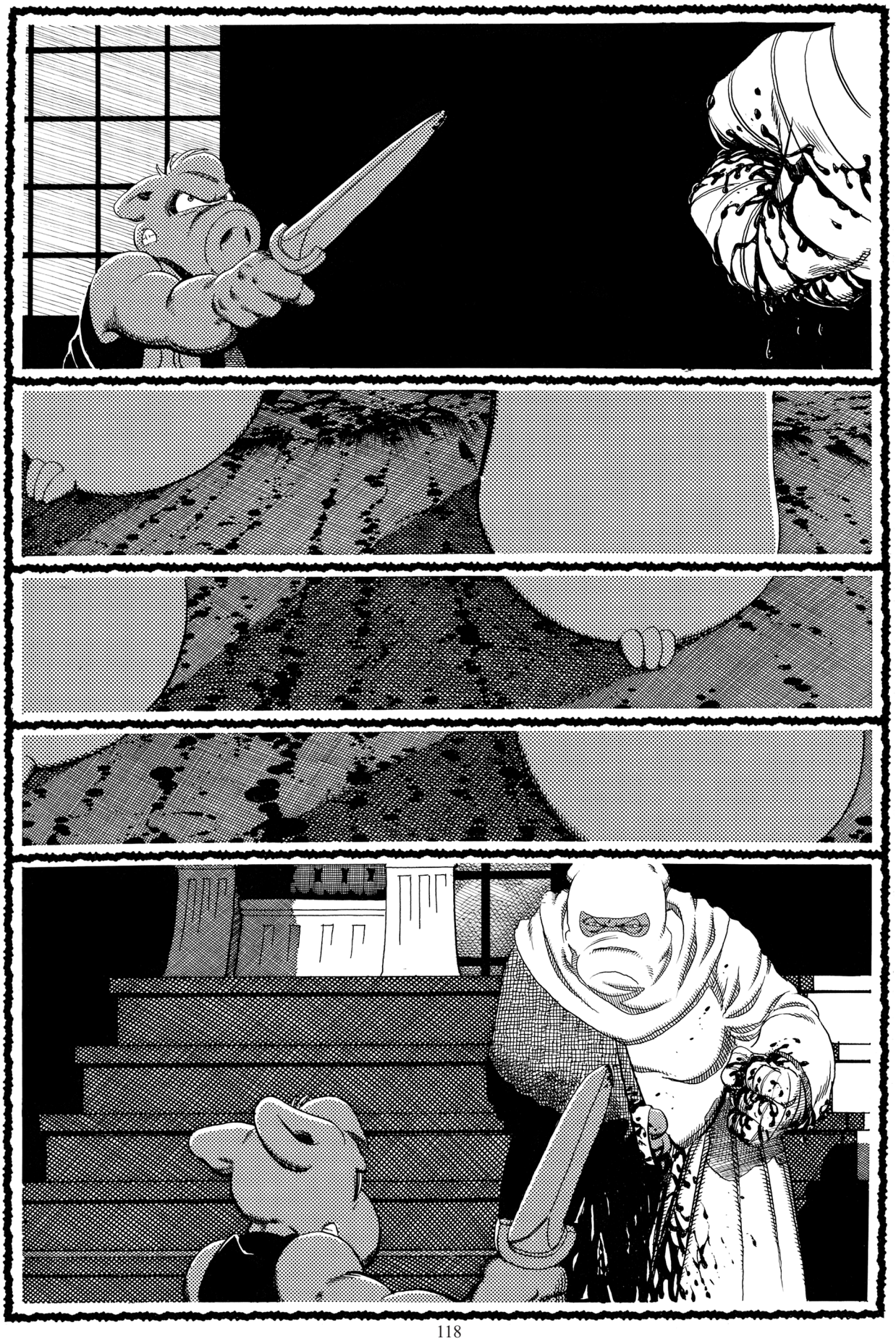


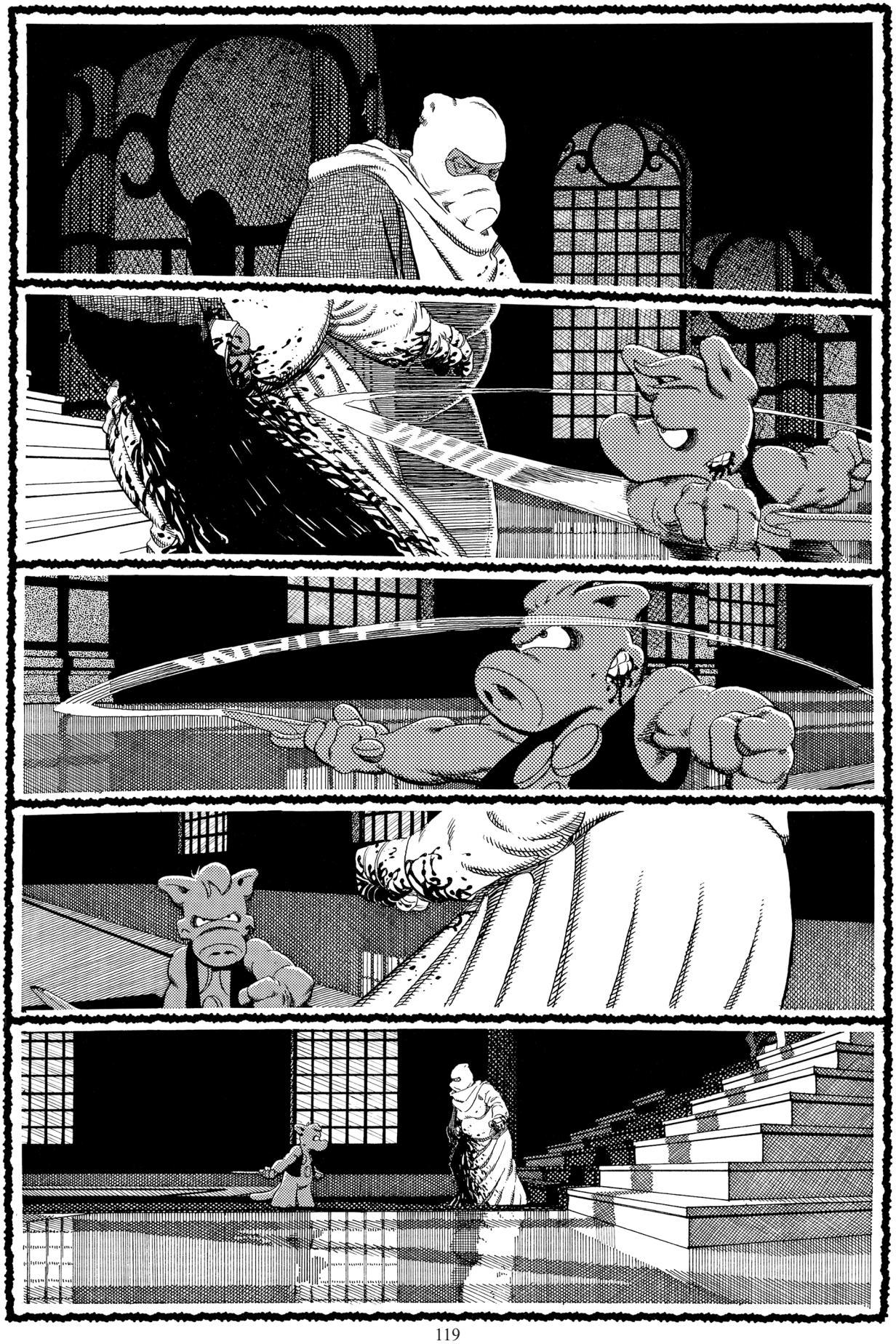

CRAK
AHH!

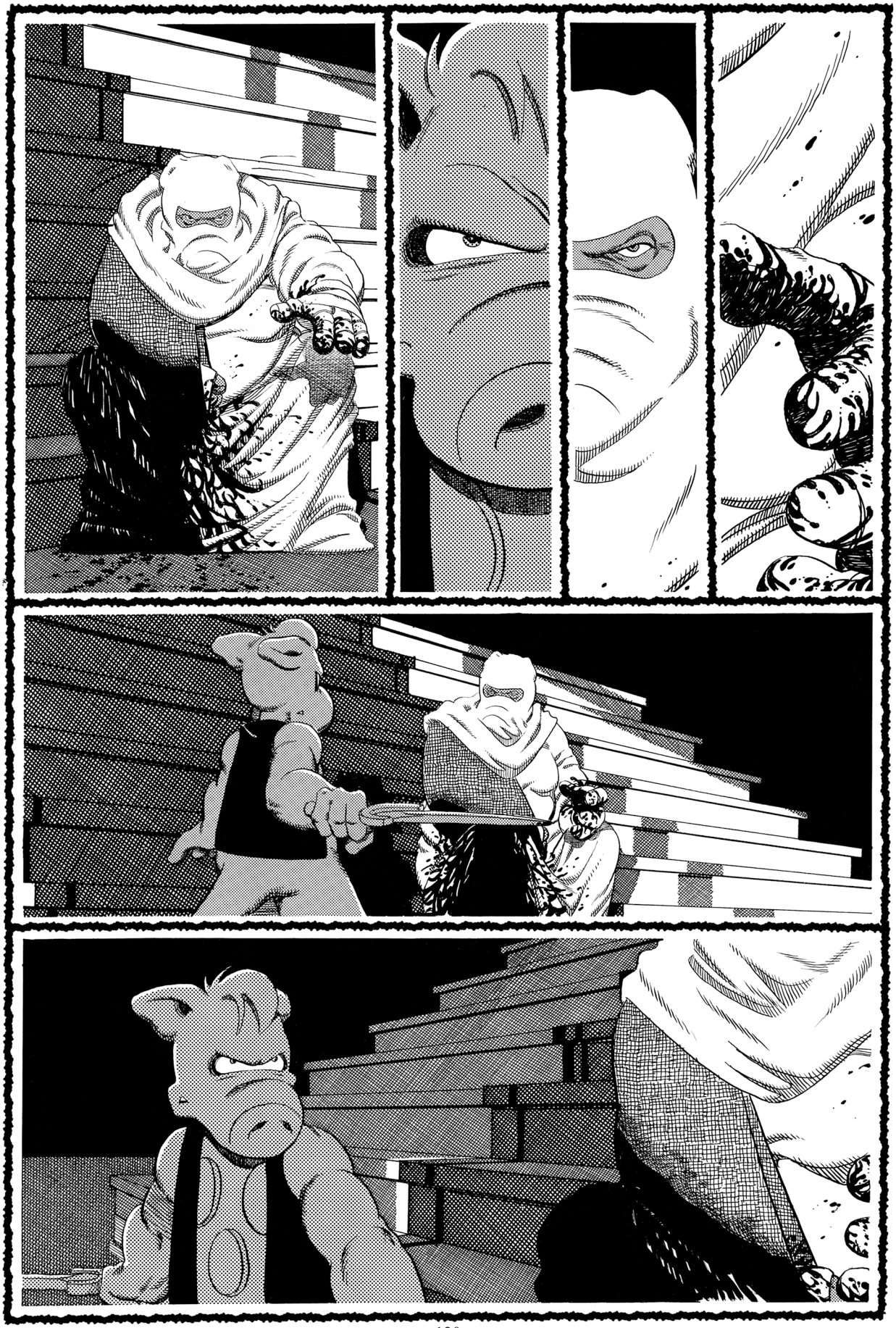

"CHAPTER ONE THOUSAND AND ELEVEN · ARTSY-FARTSY HEADINGS · SNUFF REVEALED · A MYSTERY · A PLEA · A LARGER TYPEFACE · SEVERAL SKIPPED PARAGRAPHS · A REVELATION"
"SNUFF WAS, IN REALITY, HER SIDEKICK -- BUNKY THE ALBINO -- FROM HER DAYS AS CAPTAIN COCKROACH"
"BUNKY HAD BECOME DEADALBINO WITH NO GOOD EXPLANATION EVEN IN THE BIG BOOK'S APPENDIX. NOTHING, ZIP. NADA. LIKEWISE WITH BUNKY'S INEXPLICABLE ESCAPES AND RE-APPEARANCES"
"BUNKY WAS ACTUALLY ELROD OF MELVINBONE, BUT, IN THE BIG BOOK'S ATLAS THERE WAS NO MELVINBONE -- NOT EVEN ON THE DINKY INSET MAPS WITH ALL THE STREET NAMES"
"ELROD CLAIMED TO BE THE LAST RULER OF A DYING RACE. WHY WERE THERE NO OTHER MELVIN-BONOS OR MELVINBONYOIDS (OR WHATEVER YOU WOULD CALL THEM) IN THE BIG BOOK?"
UH OH.
"FROM SOMEWHERE BELOW HER KAY $ARAH $ARAH COULD HEAR ELROD OF MELVINBONE SHOUTING -- PLEADING!"
"STOP -- AH SAY STOP, SON -- DON'T TURN THAT PAGE!"
"TO NO AVAIL! THIS WAS AN EXCITING PART! KAY $ARAH $ARAH COULD TELL! THERE WERE MANY EXCLAMATION POINTS! SHORT, CHOPPY SENTENCES! A LARGER TYPEFACE!"
"KAY $ARAH $ARAH COULDN'T WAIT! HER BOSOM HEAVING, SHE SKIPPED SEVERAL PARAGRAPHS OF PREAMBLE! SHE WENT STRAIGHT TO THE PUNCH-LINE!!"


"ELROD WAS AN ILLUSION CREATED BY CEREBUS' PROXIMITY TO THE CHAOS GEM"
"AND WAS KEPT ALIVE ONLY BY HIS BELIEF IN HIS OWN EXISTENCE"
"'LALALA' SAID THE NON-EXISTENT ALBINO, WITH HIS FINGERS IN HIS EARS."
"'LALALA, I CAN'T HEAR A...!"
"BUT..."
"UNFORTUNATELY"
"HE COULD"
POI!
"'BUMMER!"
"THOUGHT KAY SARAH SARAH"
"FOR ELROD HAD BEEN HER THIRD FAVOURITE CEREBUS CHARACTER AFTER JAKA AND LORD JULIUS..."

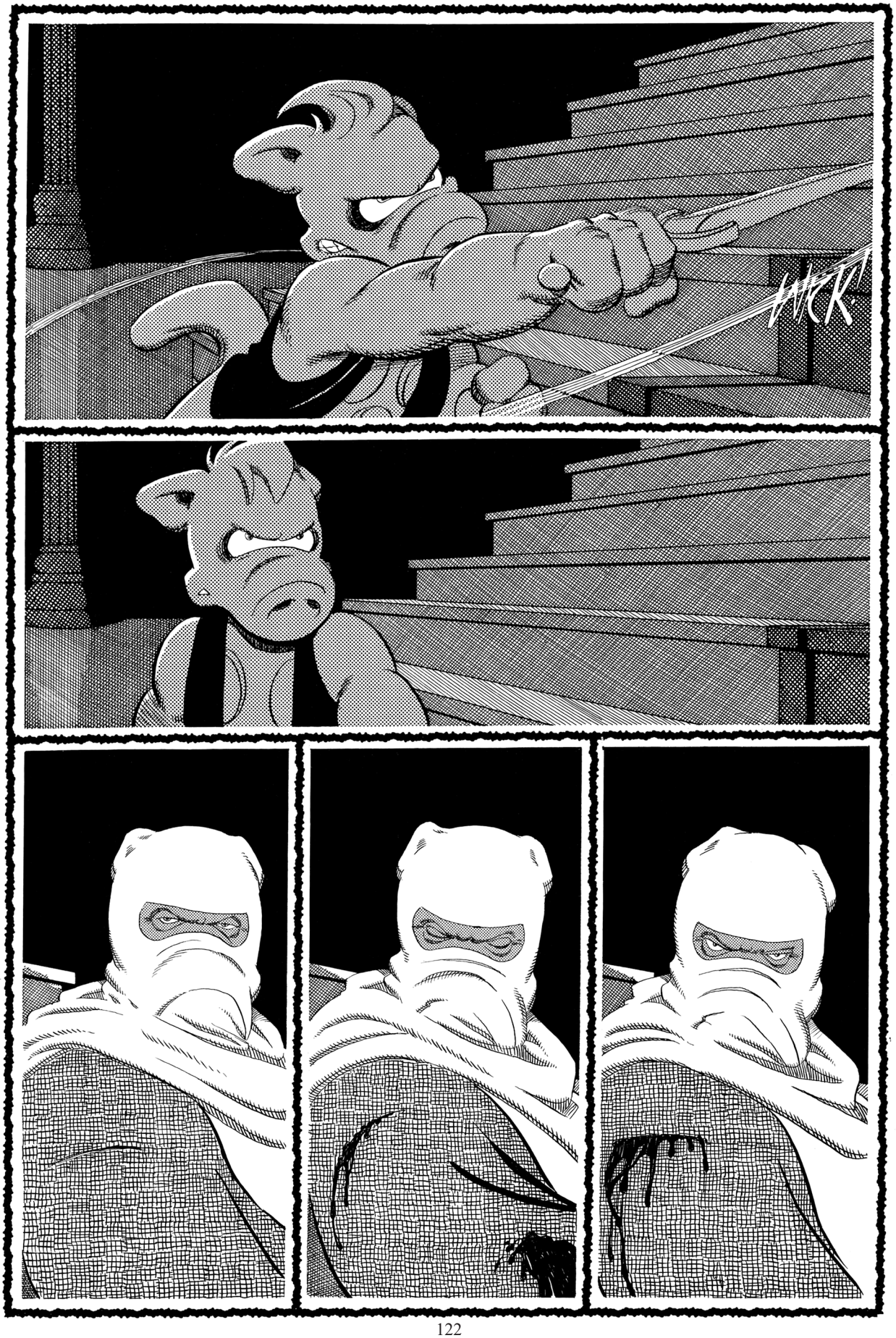




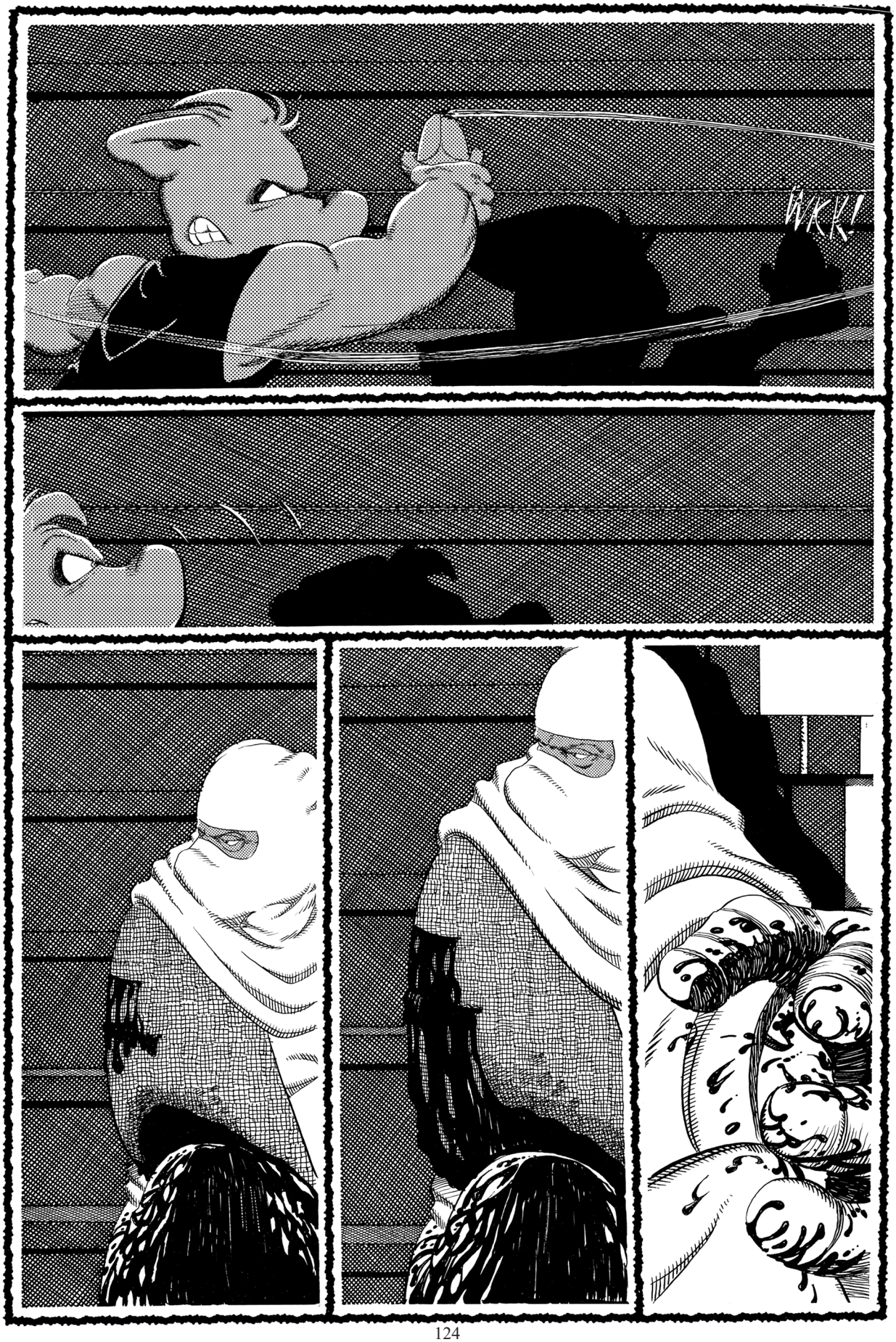






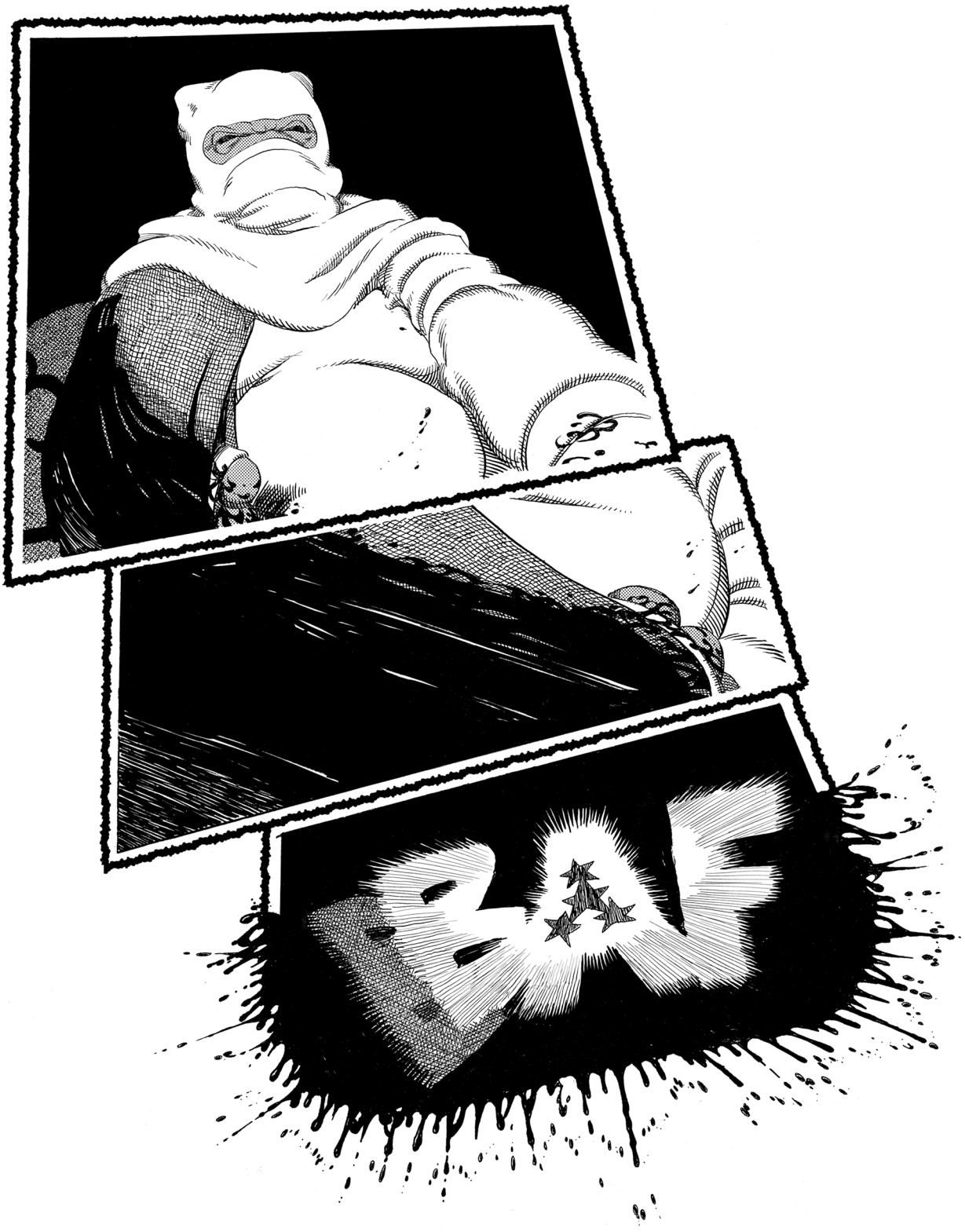

HKK!




WACK!










CRAK
CRAV

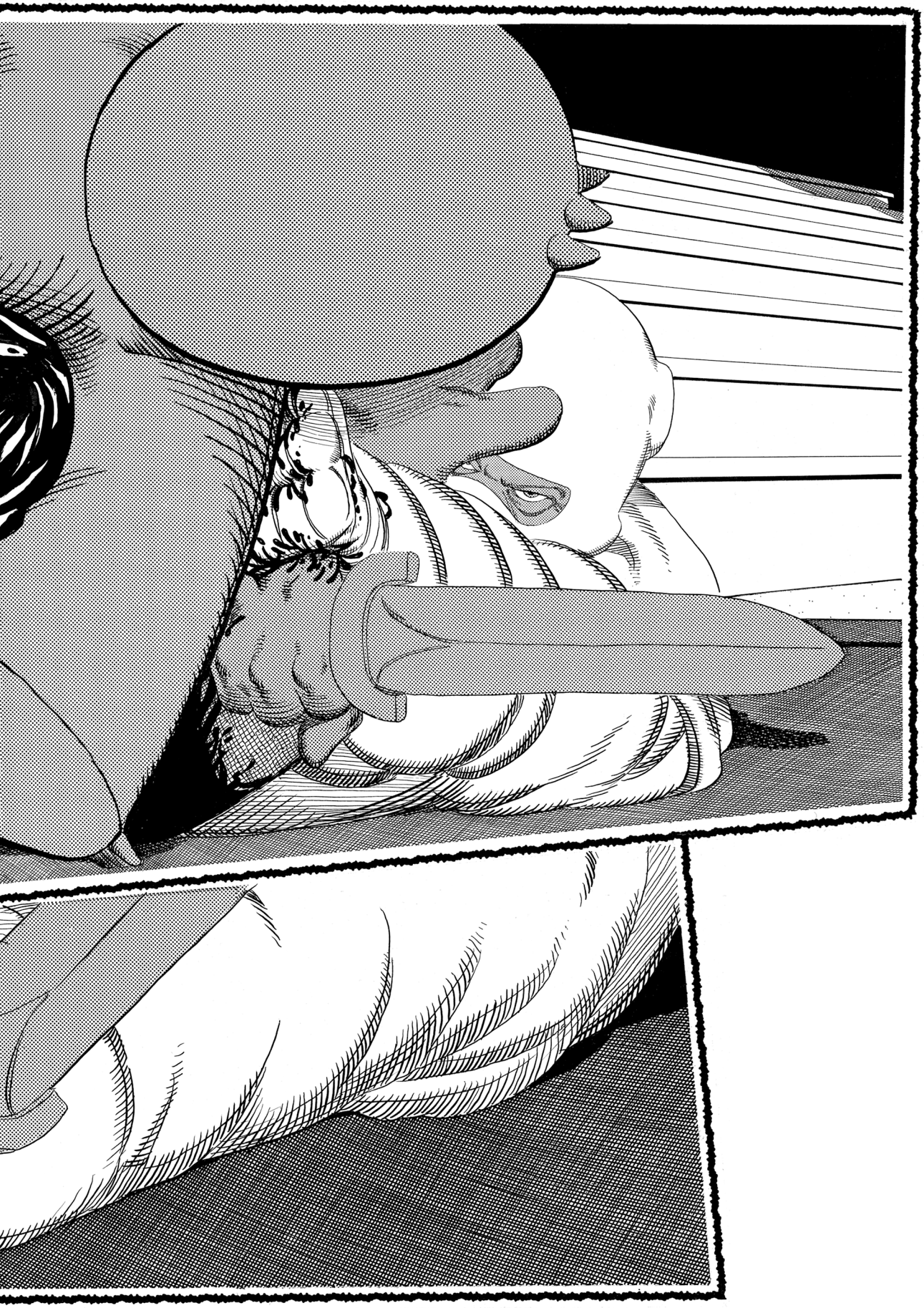




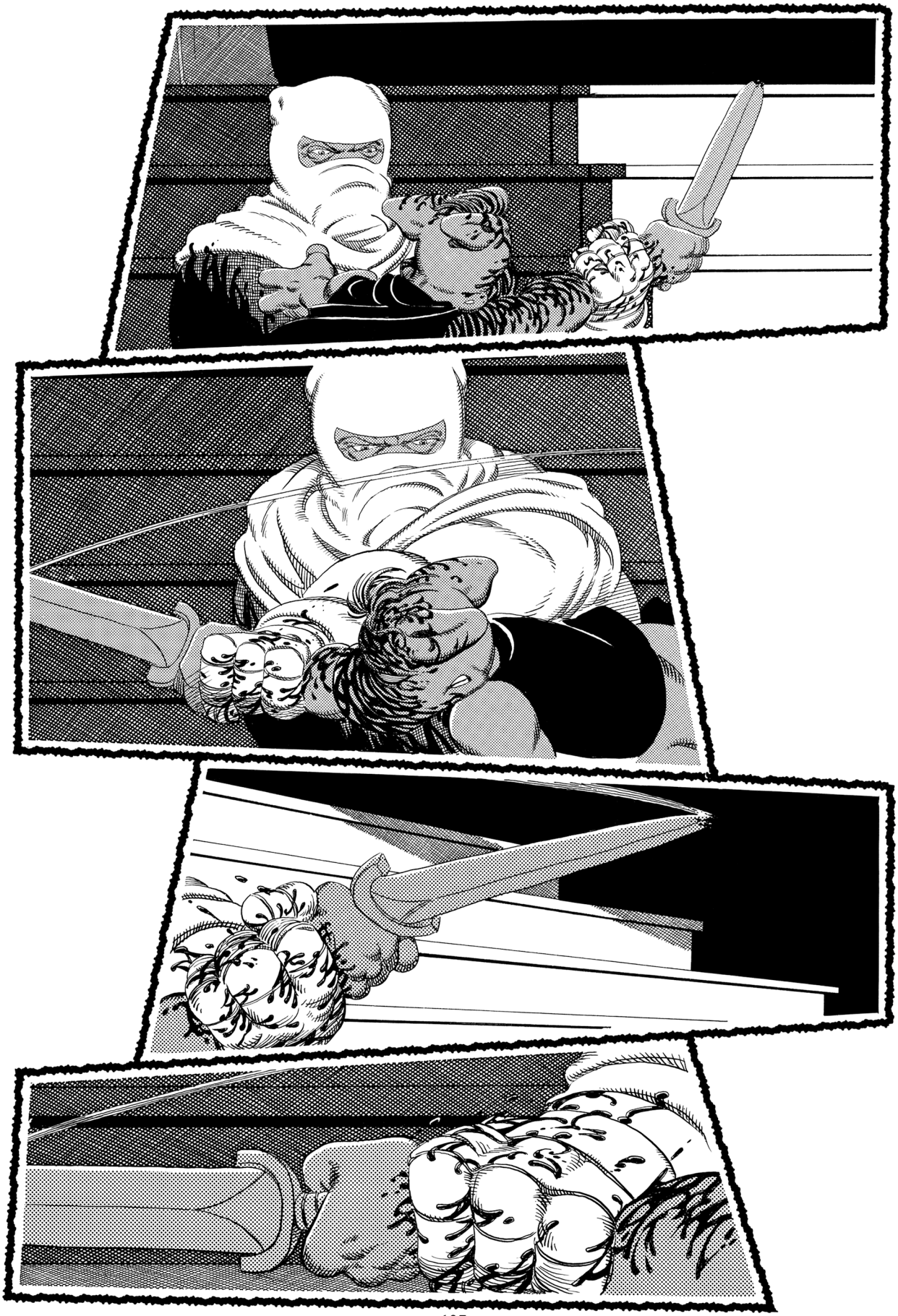






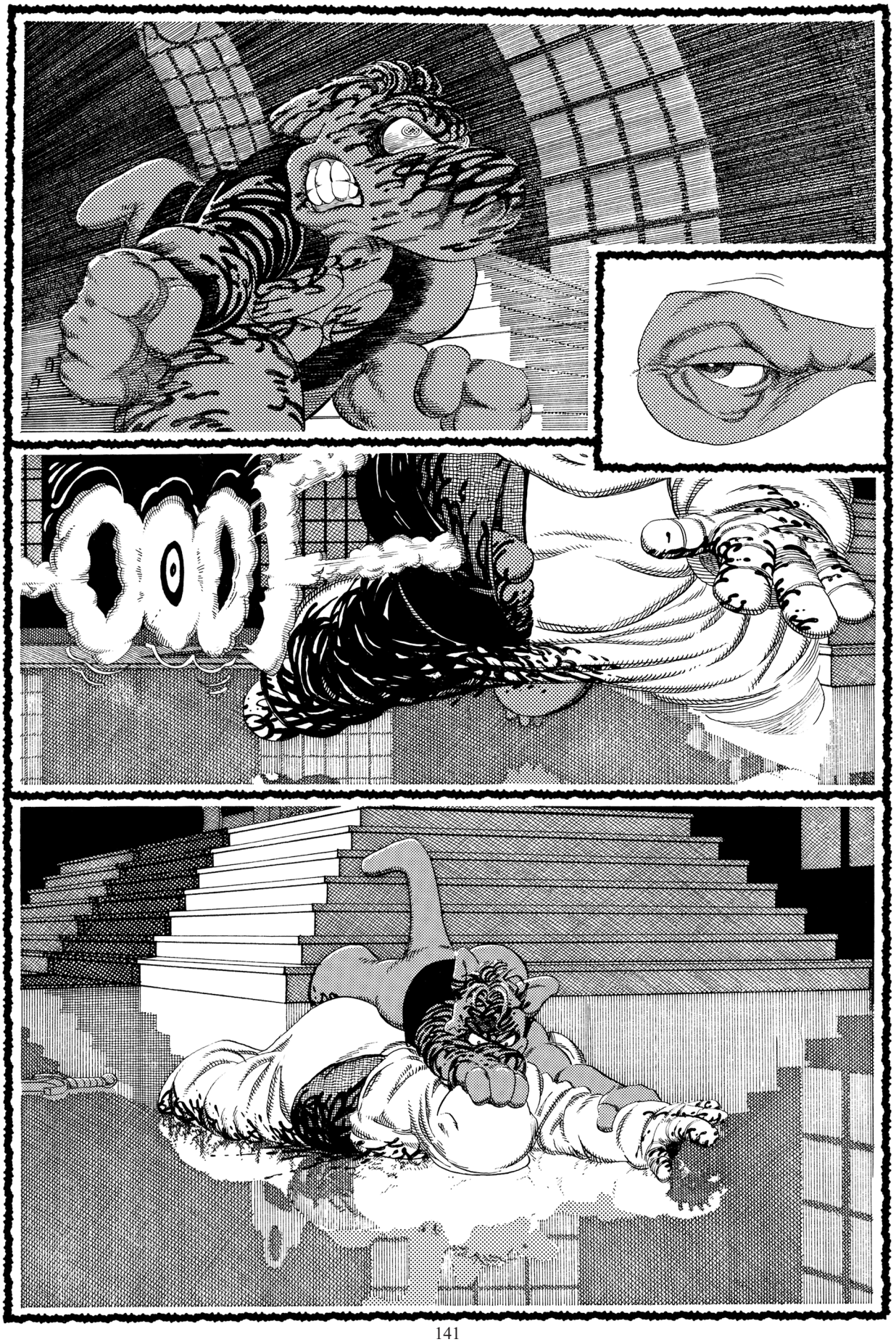


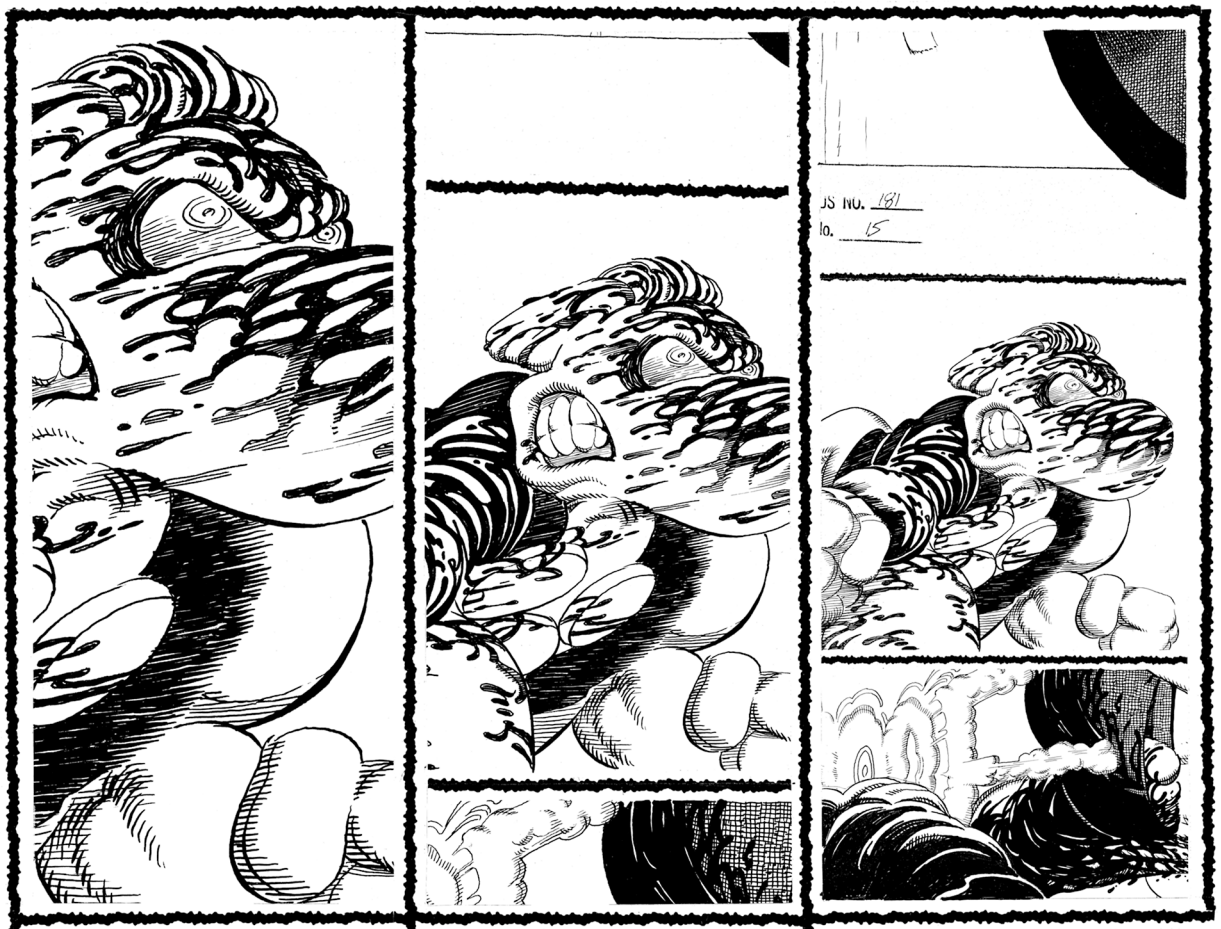


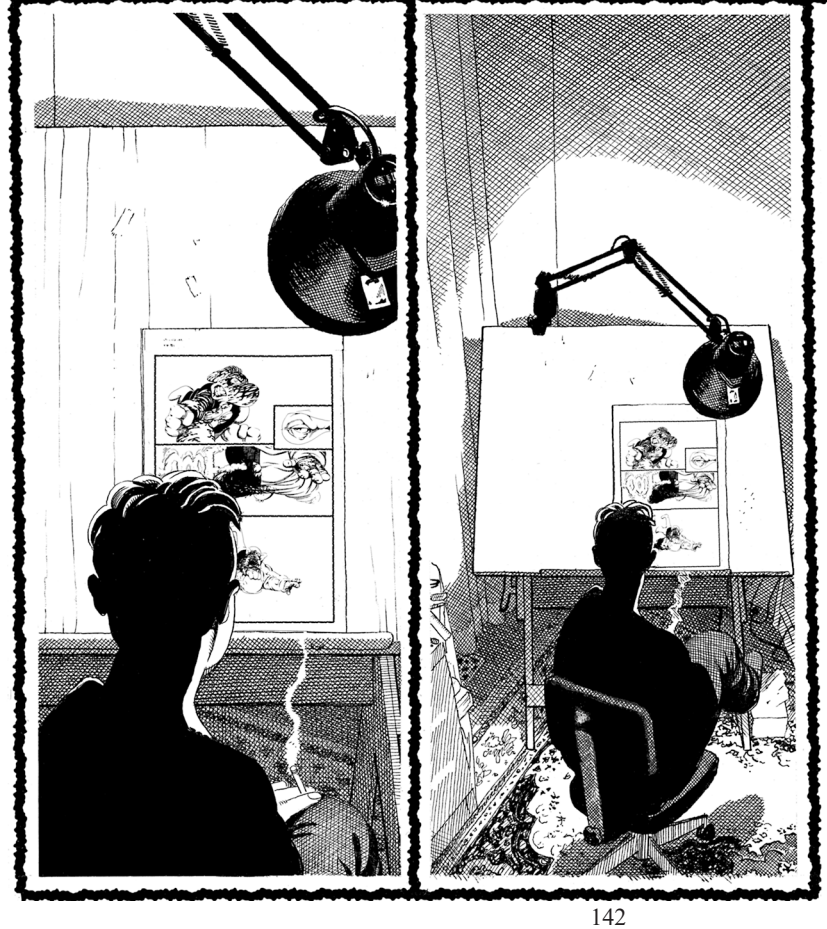



KRAK
CRAK






JS NO. 181
lo. 15





Viktor Davis turned away from his drawing board. Through a metaphorical haze of cigarette smoke and with perfect equanimity, he regarded his audience (as they, in their turn, regarded him). Their total number was only relatively certain – something in excess of the capacity of Maple Leaf Gardens but considerably less than could be accommodated by the confines of SkyDome (Rogers Centre). Chronologically, they were separated from him by a period of several

weeks: logistically, by the mechanical requirements of reproduction.



"...so, kitchee-koo, you bastards!"

Robert Crumb
Zap Comix

The invocation of things analogous being the stock in trade of any storyteller, for Viktor Davis to conjure himself in the minds of his readers, to bring the picture of his over-arching circumstance into sharper focus, required a fictitious figure (the irony of which, he was sure, would soon become apparent): Scheherezade.

It was Scheherezade, reluctant and fictitious wife of a domineering and fictitious king, who forestalled her execution by means of the stories which gave the *1,001 Arabian Nights* their name. Each story told, each night of the telling, bought her another day of life. Her imminent death hung over her like the Sword of Damocles (the courtier who overpraised the happiness of the despotic tyrant Dionysius and who was forced to sit at a banquet under a sword suspended by a single hair, that he might learn the perilous nature of that happiness). Like most stories which endure, Scheherezade and the Sword of Damocles were parables, and these two parables were very near and dear to the heart of Viktor Davis. Though uncertain of the size or shape of the sword suspended above him, though uncertain of the strength of the hair which held it, though uncertain (if truth be told) of its very existence, he had lived with the awareness of it and the fear attendant upon that awareness for much of his adult life. After a time, he had wearied of that fear – so much so that he decided, ultimately, that he would rather be dead than afraid. Though he had never spoken the words aloud, nor committed them to paper (before yesterday), he could approximate their internal sentiment.

"If you want to kill me, then kill me. If I were you, I wouldn't want someone like me walking around loose. There are a lot of things easier to do than three hundred issues of a comic book and, frankly, I put 'dying prematurely' in that category. So, either kill me or leave me alone to finish the story. Either way, no hard feelings."

To whom did Viktor Davis address these words? To whom, indeed. All in good time, thought Viktor, all in good time.



As invocation is of a like nature with sympathetic magic, and in view of the fact that recent "Q-rating" results had placed Scheherezade and Damocles well below the index required for a guest spot on the *Today* show or a supporting role in a made-for-TV movie, Viktor Davis (whose "Q-rating" was substantially lower, even, than that) thought that some more universal and modern archetype was required to accomplish his task.

Jeff Smith.

No, not *that* Jeff Smith (though there was inherent in the need for qualification a genuine victory more synchronistic than coincidental: a victory comparable to a recent news item Viktor had seen, telling of the recent divorce of comic-*book* character Dick Tracy). The Jeff Smith in question was the protagonist of Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the story of a simple man who conducts a one-man filibuster against overwhelming odds, in the face of deceitful, corrupt and nearly limitless power, in his fight for Truth.

In the interests of maintaining connection with generations dead to such sensibilities, Viktor would here like to express a willingness to amend the proper noun to the more modernistically palatable "truth" (quotes optional). To completely forestall any accusation of demagoguery (if such inference be genuinely at subjective risk), the reader is advised to substitute "reality" for "truth", as a lowest-common-denominator concession to our cynical age. At all events, let the essence of the image suffice:

Jeff Smith playing (and here was the crux of the matter) *within the boundaries of the established rules*, holding the floor of the United States Senate. So long as he remained standing – Viktor Davis was grateful that no such requirement existed for the completion of his story – so long as he yielded the floor only for a point of order, he could keep talking "from now 'til Doomsday, Mr. Speaker."

For Viktor Davis, the temporal constraint was more finite: nine years and eleven months.

Jeff Smith. Scheherezade. And the Sword of Damocles.



(absolute) Elsewhere, invisible hands adjusted the settings of metaphorical lights. The atmosphere changed slightly; the molecules composing it grew heavier, denser. From the center of the unfurnished stage, nothing was visible now but a single, unblinking white eye. Viktor's silence seemed to stretch interminably.

"Autobiography," he said quietly, removing a pack of Viscount 1's and a Bic lighter from his hip pocket. He extracted a single cigarette and lit it slowly, theatrically, savouring the moment. He remembered seeing Hal Holbrook's *An Evening with Mark Twain* in his teens.

You could have heard a pin drop in the second balcony.



Interminable and unusable passages, literary practice swings, both typed and handwritten, marked the weeks-long and painful progress which had at last brought him here: to this point. Though it might be supposed that familiarity with the raw materials would make autobiography the easiest of creative enterprises, such had not been the case. As was the case (Viktor was sure) with anyone, conversations from his past, a handful in number, glowed within his memory with vivid life. But as he transcribed them, as he nailed them to the page, crucifying them, syllable by badly constructed syllable, they were robbed of that life, rendered meaningless or (even worse) imbued with false meaning. At day's end, as he reread the fruits of his labours, his verdict upon his work was absolute, inescapable.

It was not the Truth. It was not truth. It most especially was not reality.



"Now, let me tell you of my love."

Barry Windsor-Smith
"The Beguiling"

And so it was that after many days of raucous debate, doomed attempts at effecting a compromise, and many dealings both above-board and behind the scenes, a motion was brought forward. There, in the deepest, innermost recesses of his being, in the Viktor Davis House of Commons, which was solely responsible for the direction and governance of his very existence (the Viktor Davis Senate and the Victor Davis Governor-General's Office having been abolished with the repatriating of his constitution in 1983 by a decree from the Viktor Davis Privy Council, which made unlawful the imposition of any Queen as head of state – titular or otherwise), a Bill, properly framed and tabled, was presented for consideration; "Be it Hereby Resolved that We Believe Autobiography to be, by its very Nature, intrinsically False and Nonsensical." The Bill passed by a wide margin on First Reading, support for it as near to complete unanimity as could be imagined, cutting, as it did, across party lines and many ancient loyalties. But, after the desk-thumping and the hand-shaking, the back-slapping and the paper-throwing, had subsided and Order had once more been restored, that Esteemed Chamber yet found itself contemplating many blank pages, yawning column inches of white newsprint, with no plan or agenda, program or proposal, for filling them.

As any devotee of parliamentary democracy (well, this parliamentary democracy, anyway) could tell you, it was within just such a vacuum of policy, driven by and coupled with the pressing need for an innovative and imaginative solution, that a Private Member's Bill (usually an empty "coals-to-Newcastle" gesture of Don Quixote-like proportions, sown with seeds of its own destruction) stood the greatest chance of passing into Law.

The Hon. Member for Verity-Centre rises in his place and addresses the House:

"Mr. Speaker, while I have seldom, both for reasons of missed opportunity and disinclination, taken the trouble to address this Body – interest in the Genuinely Verifiable having been, for some time, in great disfavour with my colleagues despite, or perhaps because of, their belief that the Apprehended is synonymous with the Objectively Truthful..."

Some Hon. Members: Ah, siddown. We haven't got time for this [etc.].

Speaker: Order.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been following the protracted debate over the filling of the text pages in the second half of 'Reads' with what is, for me, unusually keen interest. I believe that the contributions to that debate, representations made by the Members for Competitiveness, Entertainment, Craft, Inspiration, Posterity and the others, which on the surface may seem to be contradictory, which at face value appear unresolvable, are, in clear point of fact, aspects of a single tapestry, woven with a common thread. That thread, if my colleagues will indulge me, is Verity."

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh.

Speaker: Order.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has not escaped my attention that I am, more often than not, considered by my colleagues to be something of a liability in this chamber – most particularly, a liability to the carrying out of the creative business which so occupies the greatest majority of our collective attention. However,

Mr. Speaker, on this occasion I feel that I might have a genuine contribution to make to the debate which concerns us here."

Hon. Member for Inking: You mean like the time you asked, how do we know that India ink is really black?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear [laughter].

Speaker: Order.

"Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While I propose no sweeping thematic link for the entirety of the second half of 'Reads', I feel that the simple inclusion of these extracts, this very exchange, comes nearer the mark in the laying of a foundation in the matter of a Viktor Davis Autobiography than do any of the myriad contributions rejected previously. I would venture to say that since the very nature of our debate centers on a point of departure – "square one", if the Member for Transitional Issues will forgive me a small plagiarism – the existence of this House and the nature and type of its debate are indispensable in accomplishing that task."

To no one's great surprise, the Private Member's Bill ("Be it Hereby Resolved that the Existence of this House Serve as the Foundation for The First Part of Viktor Davis' Autobiography") passed unanimously (the Members from Convention and Privacy casting the only dissenting votes). As the Member for Verity-Centre was surrounded by his colleagues, each pressing forward to offer congratulations, the lights in the chamber began to flicker and dim. The plush coverings on the chamber seats darkened from a wine-red to a deep burgundy and at last to a dull black as a complete and utter darkness swiftly descended.



Awareness returned gradually, as it might to a senile octogenarian in a retirement home, or a dreamer upon awakening. The vivid afterimage of the House, impressed upon the retina of its observer, faded and became insubstantial. And then vanished. A new reality supplanted it (as well as the distressing thought that the new reality might prove to be no more verifiable, no less transitory than its predecessor). All was darkness.

Somewhere in the distance, a single radiant white light flashed blindingly into life.

The white wing chair seemed real enough (its fabric dazzling to the eye with the unexpected brilliance of new illumination). The stage, of course, was both familiar and quite different; irregularities, a certain shabbiness, were visible, at closer proximity, in the painted floorboards.

Lounging in an identical chair (which was turned at an angle complementary to the first), close enough to touch, sat Viktor Davis, lighting another cigarette. He took a long drag from it, expelling the smoke in a few small, irregular rings and then an emphatic cloud, which undid his most recent handiwork. In the silence and darkness beyond the footlights, it was unclear whether the twenty thousand seats were empty or not.

"Audiences," he said, as if the single word explained everything.

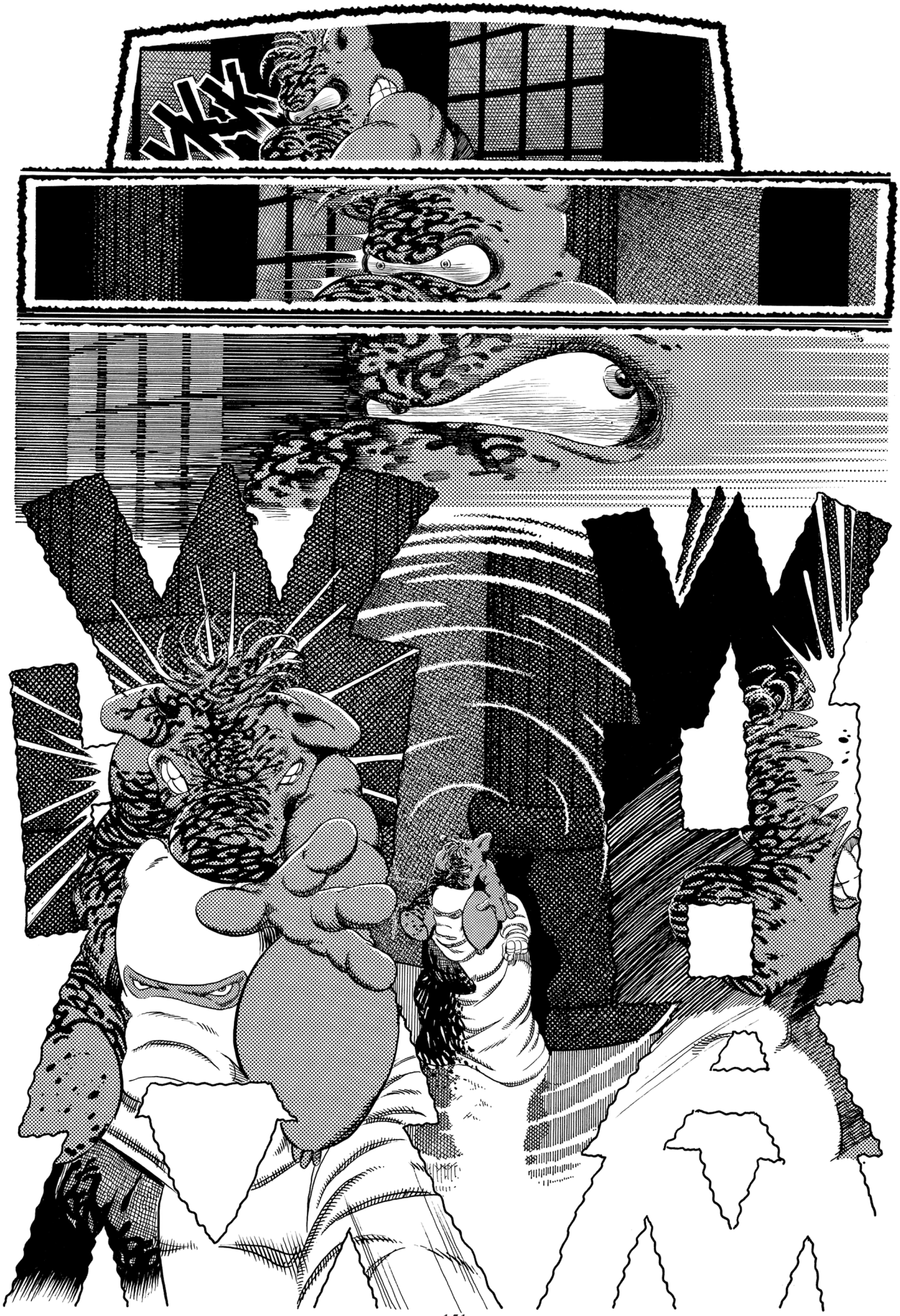
> *"An intellectual is someone whose mind watches itself. I am happy to be both halves, the watcher and the watched."*
>
> Albert Camus

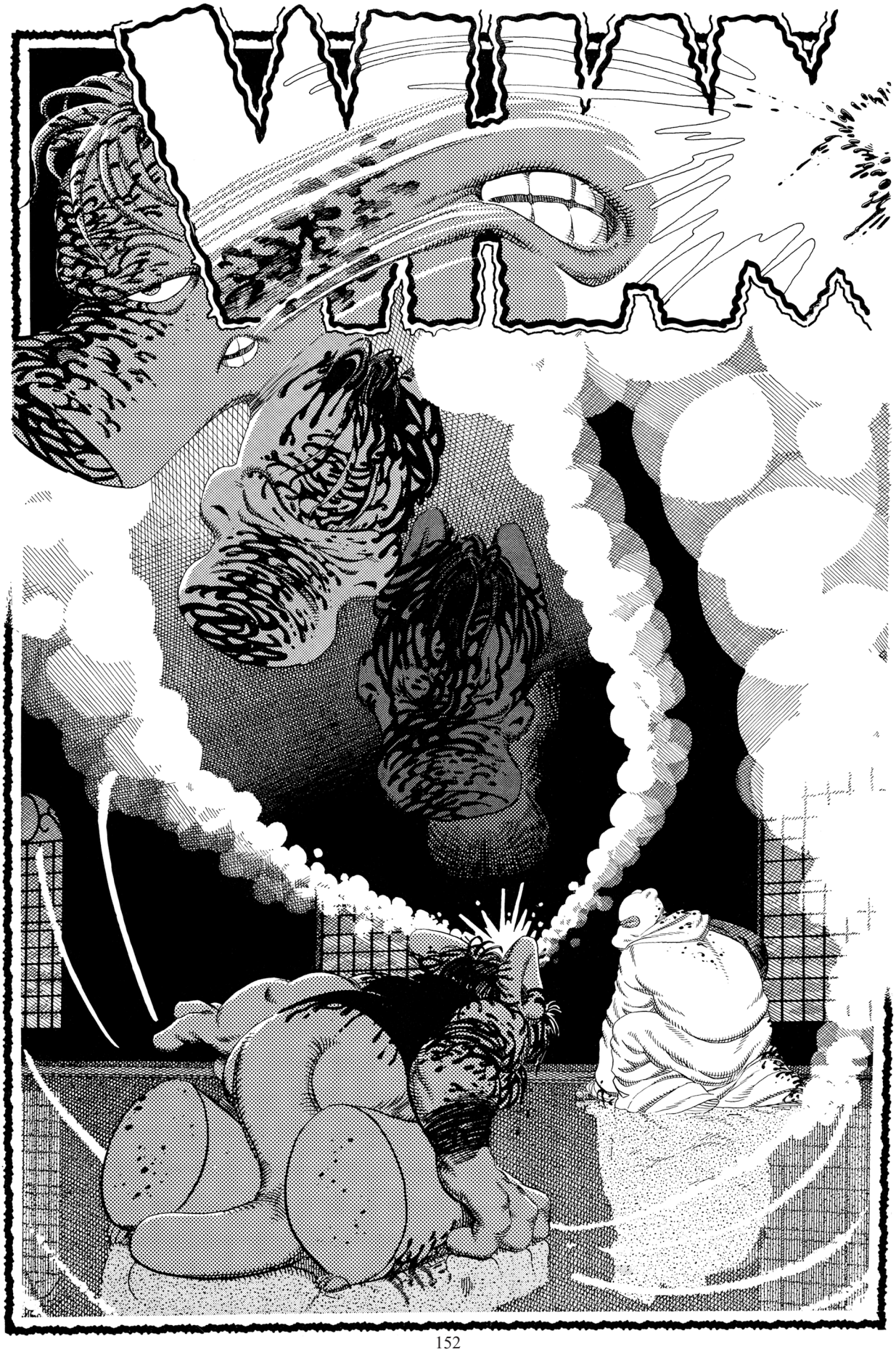

AUDIENCE.....


'ILLUMINATING'
'VISIONARY'
'BRILLIANT'
FORTY--
THOUSAND--
EYES
ROACH™!
ACK

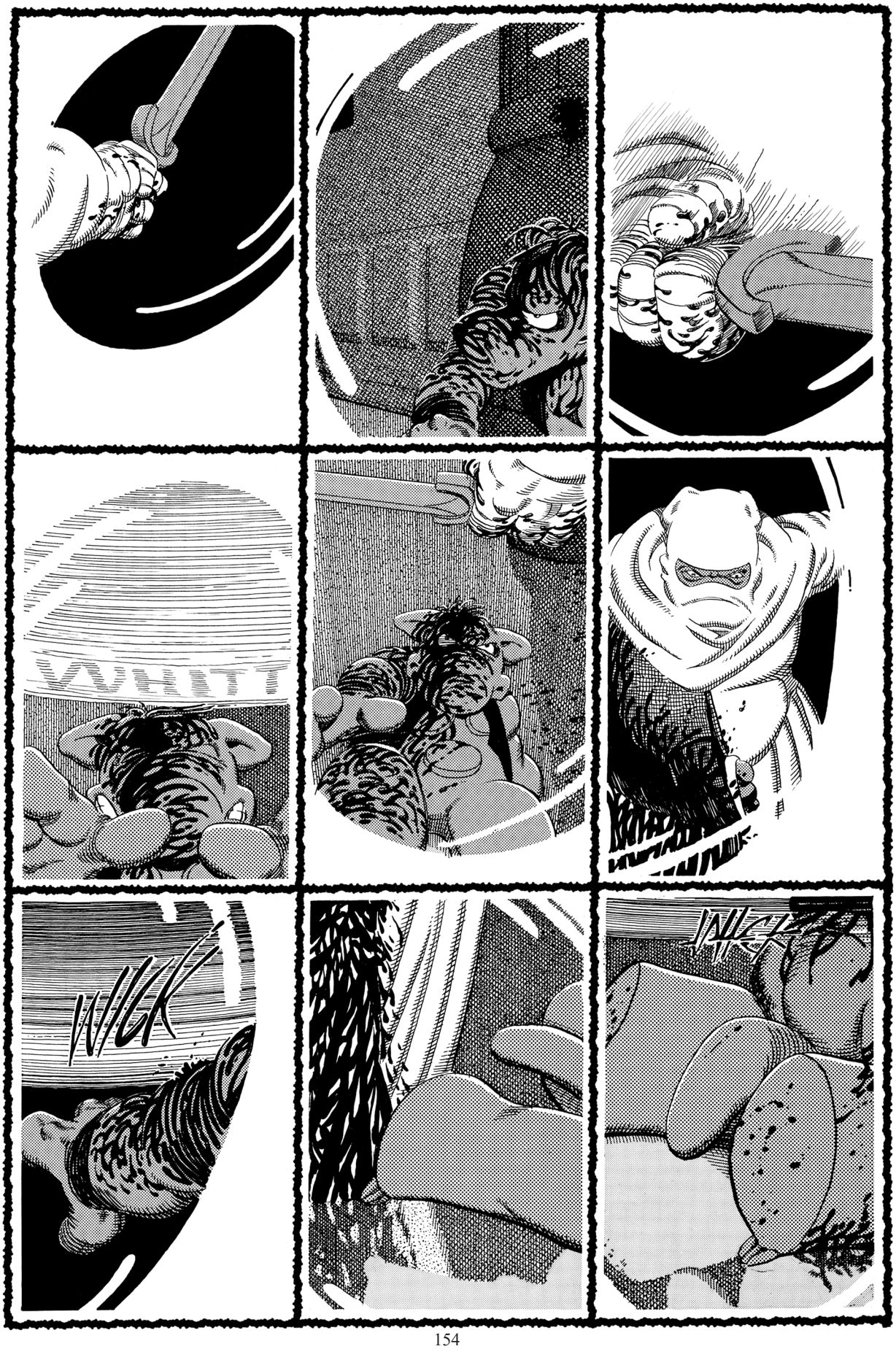

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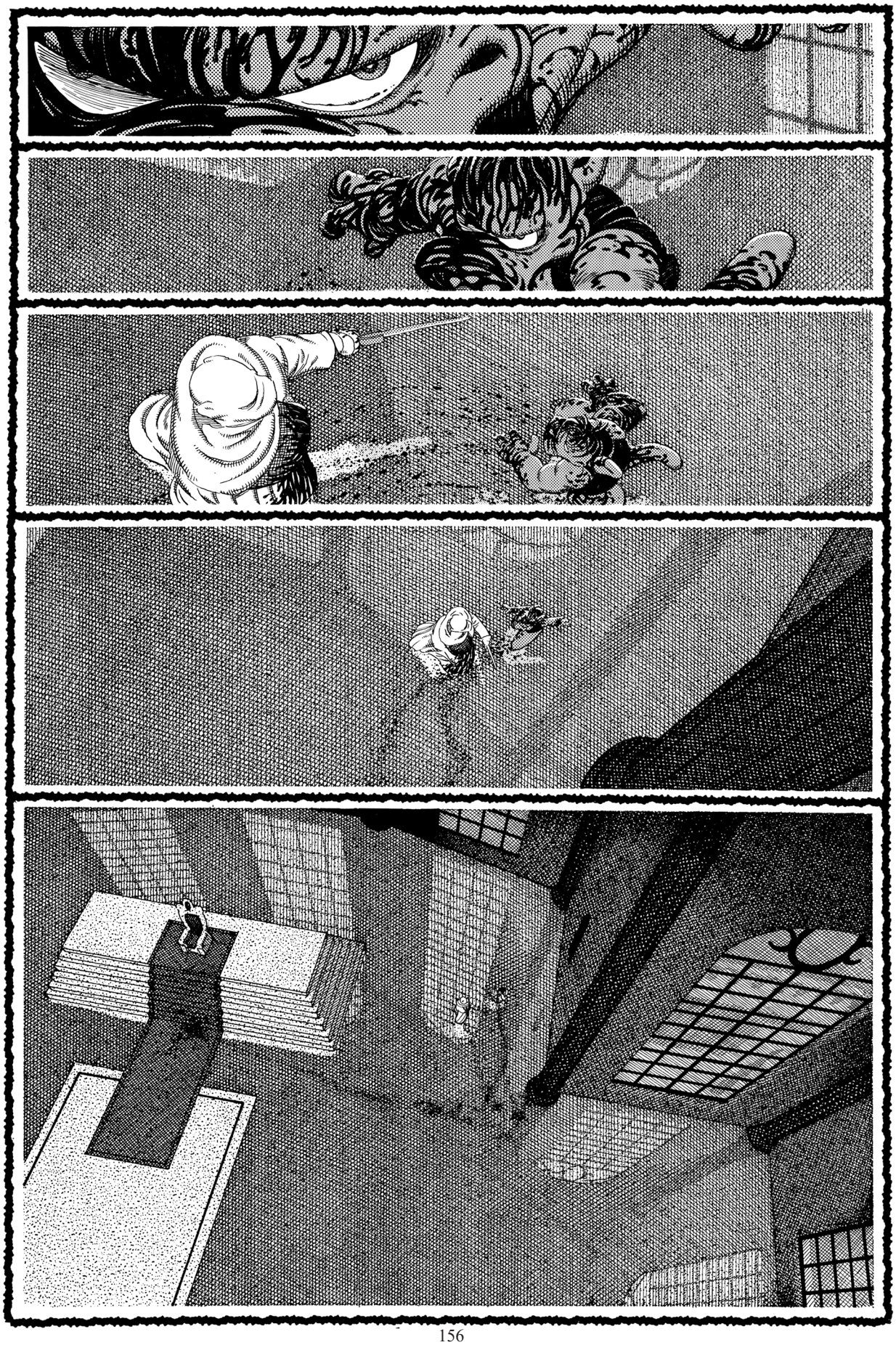


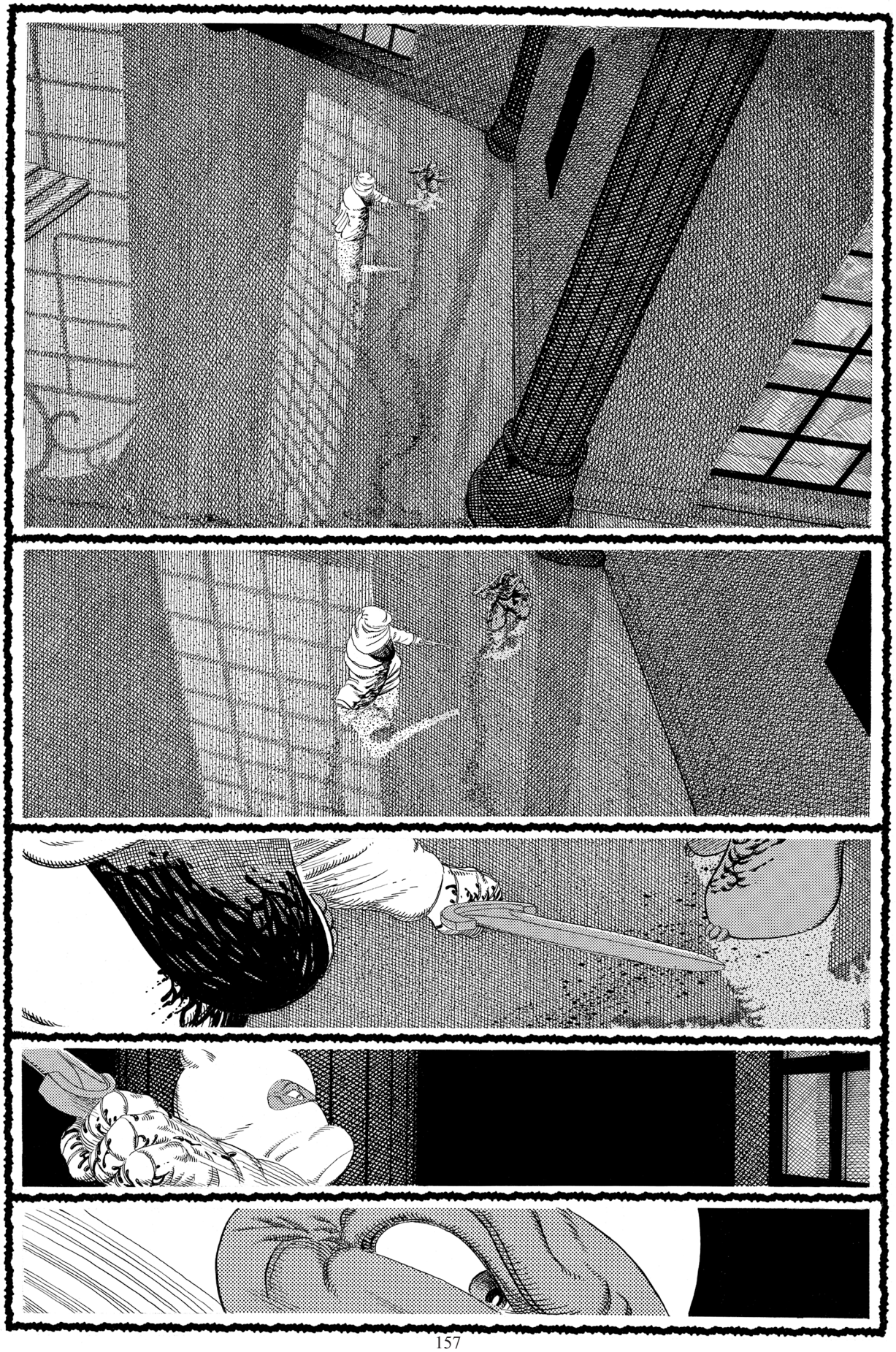





WHITT
NICK
NICK


SWIFT






WHIT
WICK


NICK


THUMP

Viktor Davis was quiet for some time, gazing distractedly into the middle distance. The single word, "audiences", hung in the air with an aroma about it that was both repulsive and enticing, like an open bottle of cheap whiskey the morning after.

What are you thinking about?

What's wrong?

Tell me what you're thinking.

Talk to me talk to me talk to me.

It was a female refrain woven through his life like a discordant crimson thread in the blue and gold cloth of his ordered and solitary existence. It formed no pattern (though it was a female conceit that it did). It grew thick and then thin; it widened, then narrowed. It looped against itself, all irregular curves and arcs and knots and flourishes: this way and that, that way and this.

See? See? I can make a pattern, too! What are you thinking about?

I think I know why men have beards and women don't. I think I know why women want to be men and men don't want to be women.

My girlfriend has a mustache. What are you thinking about?

Viktor was thinking of a rainy spring evening in Oakland, California, scarcely a year before. He was thinking of a convention dinner with all of the guests and organizers, whose attendance had mushroomed out of all sane or manageable proportions. He remembered going outside with Neil Gaiman (several times) for a cigarette break. Never much of a one for small talk, he had taken the opportunity to compliment Neil on his series *Books of Magic* and to focus, particularly, on the recurring question in the story, "Do you believe in magic, boy?" Viktor offered the opinion that, unless he was mistaken, Neil did not have an answer to the question, relative to himself. Taking another drag of his Viscount 1 and staring Neil directly in his Lou Reed sunglasses, Viktor had asked, "Do *you* believe in magic, boy?"

After the mandatory Gaimanesque cocking-of-the-head-to-one-side, the sucking-in-of-the-lips-between-the-teeth and the pregnant pause (mouth theatrically agape) which bespoke imminence — Something Significant This Way Comes — came Neil's answer:

"There's...*something*...there."

He went on at some ellipsis-laden length but, by then, Viktor had stopped listening. Neil returned the favour by not listening as Viktor inquired if he felt any qualms about selling the trademark for Death to a multinational corporation which had the Eye of Horus as its corporate symbol and whose vaults contained the original 16 mm print of the Zapruder film, particularly in light of its recent market-shaking success with the Death of Superman.

For Neil (it seemed to Viktor) the "something" was "there", not "here", a tapestry of crimson with the gold and blue embroidery of his creativity adorning its edge.

Viktor had heard recently that Neil had another baby on the way.

What are you thinking about?

Saturday morning, Viktor Davis had made himself a pot of coffee from the remnants of a bag of grounds Milieu had purchased on her last visit. The bag exhorted Viktor to recycle it. A small folded card, jauntily attached by means of a gold-coloured string, reminded him that he should only buy enough coffee to last him a week; after the expiry date handwritten upon it (now four months past), the coffee would no longer be at its "peak of freshness" and Viktor would be "disappointed". The card itself was a deep, ugly chocolate in colour (one hundred percent red, one hundred percent blue, one hundred percent yellow). The card allowed that Viktor could store the coffee in an "airtight container in the refrigerator". It cautioned that Viktor should freeze the coffee only as a "last resort". He was informed that it was always best to grind his own beans and that the ideal time to do so was "just before brewing". He was advised to use the "correct grind for his coffee maker". Viktor should use "spring, filtered, or bottled water when possible". The card was emphatic in directing that the coffee be served "immediately". If necessary (if he found himself unable to drink all four cups "immediately", Viktor inferred), the card told him to store the coffee in a "thermal carafe" since it would become "bitter" if left on the burner. The card cooed that Viktor should "savour the aroma before tasting". It concluded by cheerfully commanding him to "come back for more. And think about experimenting..." (not to "experiment", of course, but to "think about experimenting") "...either with another type of bean or by creating your own blend" (visions

of breakfast-time infidelities behind the back of "butter pecan" — card-sanctioned serial caffeine polygamy — danced in titillating fashion in the recesses of Viktor's imagination).

Viktor made his coffee with plain tap water. He left it sitting on the burner as he worked and reworked his story.

It tasted very much like coffee.

The bag, even as he wrote these words several days later, lurked somewhere beneath a pizza box and some dirty plates.

What are you thinking about?



Cerebus had just had his right ear severed, an event which had been foreshadowed several times in the preceding years and pages of Viktor's story. It was a new shock, a new surprise. It differed from the revelation that Cerebus was an hermaphrodite or that Elrod had never existed, as these were facts to which the reader was now fully (if somewhat uneasily) adjusted. Viktor had come to view the last half of the twentieth century as the Age of the Self-Sealing Puncture. Even as it became obvious that Nothing Was Certain, a corollary belief had arisen that Everything Must Be Accommodated.

What had taken place behind closed doors? What did they know and when? Which one is lying? Are they both lying?

Give them a suspended sentence and a movie contract, five hundred hours of community service and a made-for-TV mini-series, two years in jail and a book deal. Let them plead insanity.

The larger question, both unasked and unanswered, was: "Why is this so important? Why is this front-page news?" We have no way of determining what actually happened, so let's have a phone poll. Why? What will a phone poll tell us? Michael Jackson, Anita Hill, William Kennedy Smith, Tonya Harding, Mike Tyson. You, the audience, will decide.

You'll decide that you're not sure.

And then the trial will end.

Next?

"Audiences," said Viktor Davis, as if the single word explained everything.

What are you thinking about?



A TV reporter covering a comic-book convention for a local television news program had once asked Viktor Davis to explain the popularity of comic books in the Television Age (the way the reporter had said it, both words were proper nouns). Viktor had explained that the free expression of ideas was still possible in the comic-book field, while television, by its nature, had to leech out all meaningful content and ideas before something became suitable for broadcast.

The thirty seconds of coverage consisted, primarily, of a retailer holding up a copy of *Superman* No. 1 and telling how many thousands of dollars it was worth in perfect condition.

What are you thinking about?



Viktor Davis looked down and saw two cookies on a small, flowered plate. He realized he was in the kitchen of his grandparents' house in Stoney Creek, Ontario. A female voice (his mother? his grandmother? his sister?) was telling him that the cookies were for Santa Claus. Moments before, Viktor had been seated in a classroom at Forest Hill Public School, trying to focus his attention on some lesson or other. Evidently, a period of a year and several months had elapsed.

What are you thinking about?



Monday morning there had been no mail for him to read, which was unusual. There was, however, a fax from Valerie, a staff artist for the greeting card company which had employed Robert Crumb. Viktor had met her briefly at *Super-City Comics* in Cleveland on the US Tour, the weekend Superman had died (November 22nd). Along with several examples of parthenogenesis and hermaphroditism in the animal kingdom, she had enclosed an excerpt from a book entitled *Unsolved Mysteries* two pages in length (pages 82 — strength and the priestess —and 83 — strength and the empress) which documented "The Riddle of the Crystal Skull", a five-inch-tall, eleven-and-a-half-pound sculpture carved from a solid piece of quartz crystal, with hand-ground lenses in the eyes and prisms hidden in the base. In a mere nine paragraphs the skull is described as: carrying a terrible legacy that could curse anyone who came in contact with it (misfortune or even death); having the power to heal, teach ancient wisdom or kill after a mere touch; causing poltergeist-like phenomena; levitating objects; making frightening noises; having the greatest potential for good; being used to tap into the natural electromagnetic field surrounding living things; and (once

again) to heal. British medium Carole Davis (no relation) says the skull works like a computer, storing information that can be passed on to those who are psychically attuned. Baffled scientists confess (bless me, O Goddess, for I have sinned) that the skull's construction appears to be a feat far beyond the technology and skills of the early people of Mesoamerica. In fact, when a group of scientists studied the skull in California, they confessed (bless me, O Goddess, for I have sinned) that they couldn't duplicate it, even using modern tools. It is believed to be 1,000 years old. It is believed to be 3,600 years old. It is believed to be thousands of years older than that. It is believed to be from Atlantis and was used by ancient priests to peer into the future. Forensic experts reconstructed a face from the skull. It was a young Indian female in her late teens or early twenties. It may have been worked on at least three different times, hundreds of years apart.

It was owned by a woman in Kitchener, Ontario. When Viktor looked up her name in the phone directory, he found that her residence was within a block of the house which had served as the basis for the *Young Cerebus* story "The Girl Next Door." Viktor wrote out a reprint volume order for one copy of *Jaka's Story* and wrote "comp" across it, filling in the woman's name and address.

What are you thinking about?



Tuesday morning, the elevator in Viktor's apartment building stopped on the fourteenth floor. The onboard computer voice announced "thirteenth floor". Viktor remarked on this to the gentleman for whom the elevator had stopped. He said that sometimes it sounded like "thirteenth floor" and sometimes it sounded like "fourteenth floor". The computer voice, he said, couldn't seem to make up its mind.

What are you thinking about?



Did all of this add up to something? Was there an element common to each of these which formed a coherent picture of some kind? John Lennon once said that there were only a few dozen people who truly understood what the Beatles were about. Do you think he underestimated or overestimated that number? And what does your answer tell you about yourself? Please write your answer on one side of the paper which was not provided. If the unexamined life is not worth living, why is it that those who examine their lives never seem to be having a good time? Define: "worth living". The answer counts for half of your final grade. *What are you thinking about?*



Now? Now he was thinking about Alan Moore. A casual observer seeing Alan for the first time might be forgiven for noting his similarity in appearance to an Old Testament prophet. He might be forgiven, as well, for thinking Alan Moore to be an aging hippie, stuck in a decade now as distant from us as the sixties, themselves, were from the Dirty Thirties. More striking than Alan's appearance was Alan's voice, which was deep (no, deeper than that), resonant (no, more resonant than that), ancient (as ancient as the English city which he called home and from which he seldom, if ever, strayed). Viktor Davis was thinking of a comfortable living room in a comfortable house and an evening's conversation now some five (six?) years distant. An evening which made three months in Hawaii seem as shallow as...well, three months in Hawaii. Alan Moore is as capable as any in the area of small talk, idle chitchat, the pitter-patter of careless lubrication in the machinery of human interaction, but his self-evident preference is for Larger Issues, all-encompassing and inescapable verities: the *WHEELS* which turned the *Wheels*, which turned the *wheels*, which turned the wheels. Alan, typically, begins talking in a meandering tone, weaving a mental image with words, setting in motion a train of thought. At critical junctures – as he approaches the crux of his argument, the hub of his Wheel du Jour – he suddenly lurches towards you, his eyes widen and they seem to bore twin holes in your own, driving his thoughts deep into the inner recesses of your own awareness.

On this night, this particular night, Alan is holding forth on the subject of stories, histories, lies, myths and legends. His proposition is that they are all permutations of the same thing, that they are all stories and that a story, like energy, can neither be created nor destroyed. A story exists and has a life, in and of itself, a life which is immutable. By way of example, he cites the (then) newly fashionable theory that dinosaur skeletons had been improperly reassembled, reconstructed. The Tyrannosaurus Rex's leg bones did not fit properly when assembled in the conventional lizard-like "back-to-front" configuration. A persuasive argument had been made that the legs were actually "bird-like" (or "front-to-back") in structure. In Alan's view, even if this new perception prevailed, even if it were, irrefutably, proven to be True (or even "True" or "true" or true), the lizard-like Tyrannosaurus Rex would still exist. The image of it, in countless books, movies, paintings and written descriptions would sustain it, sustain the reality of it, sustain its lizard-like "story" in the face of all efforts in the scientific community to supplant it. The new "bird-like" Tyrannosaurus Rex was simply another story which had always existed but only awaited being "told" to achieve a greater substance based on "belief".

This was a subtle point which, to Viktor Davis, had the unmistakable stink of Truth about it. He found the implications of this Story (for such it was) far-ranging and compelling in the extreme. It amounted to an alternative view of human history where fact, genuine fact, virtually did not exist. All that existed were stories, lies, myths and legends. It revealed a madness inherent in the scientific world where, for untold generations, educated people had laboured in the relentless search for the indisputably factual, seeking to define the known universe and to fit all elements of it into an orderly system of numbers, ratios and proportions, even as their inescapable "storyteller" nature; chaotic, fractious and imaginative, was working at cross purposes to their avowed intent. Each theory, each "story" they created, became real, became True, for a percentage of their community. Following the train of Alan's argument to its logical conclusion, the contest between scientific theories becomes one of a like nature with the contention between Christian and Pagan Europe in the Dark Ages. It is a contest of "faith" in a "story" extrapolated from a set of generally accepted "facts". Like the Reformation, "Chaos Theory" (a story which has always existed, which can neither be created nor destroyed) is given voice to. Like the Reformation, it brings about a dramatic shift in the prevailing view of "reality", gathering adherents to it. Like Elder Gods above an Ancient Battlefield, Einstein's elusive "Unified Theory" and "Chaos Theory" eye each other, balefully, across the tidal ebb and flow of opposing scientific belief systems, even as their adherents, their true believers, attempt to discredit or eradicate the system of belief opposite them. Digits which had been "crunched" in a computer; "facts" distilled from repetitious experimentation, infinitesimal measurements, these were raw materials, grist for the scientific mill. Once attached to a "theory", however; once an overarching implication was inferred, drawn, speculated upon, composed, put forward, given voice to; a "story" was told which would be perceived as irrefutable for a time, until another "story" which had always existed was given voice to, thereby creating an opposing belief system. At that moment the earlier "theory", the earlier "story", became less certain, clinging to its place in the pantheon of objective reality by the tenuous thread of "belief". That which *was* irrefutable – or, more accurately, that which had survived many centuries unscathed in the crucible of Truth (Newton's Laws of Motion, as an example), could be judged to be factual. Facts were not stories. Facts were story elements.

There was no Church of Newton's Laws of Motion. For sane, rational beings (if we regard ourselves as such), what could make more sense than to use as a foundation for our beliefs that which was irrefutable? In such a church, to whom would we give thanks that "an object in motion or at rest will remain in motion or at rest, unless acted upon by an outside force"? What, specifically, would we be thanking them for?

The more Viktor Davis contemplated Alan Moore's "story" (and he had contemplated it a great deal in the ensuing years), the more implications seemed to adhere to it. What was religion at its essence (*all* religion) but the "carving in stone" of specific stories? The moon was a fact. The sun was a fact. A rainbow was a fact. In a day and age when these facts were inexplicable, the storyteller filled a fundamental need; fact and speculation were (and are) the raw materials of his craft. Plausibility was (and is) a fundamental requirement of a good story which merged fact and speculation. The urge to turn a story into a fact is fundamental to the non-storyteller. The need to "know" was synonymous with the need to "believe". People would ask Viktor Davis all the time, "Are you Cerebus?" He would patiently explain that he (Viktor Davis) was a walking, breathing human being; he (Cerebus) was a drawing on paper ("...and they call *me* crazy," Viktor would think to himself on these occasions). A storyteller can create a god who controls the tides, another who rides the sun across the sky, yet another who lives inside every raindrop that ever was or ever will be. All that is required is for the storyteller to say or to write, "There is a god who controls the tides." As Alan Moore has said about *From Hell*, it isn't important to him whether his portrayal of the events surrounding the Jack the Ripper murders are True (or "True" or "true" or true). What concerns him is that his portrayal of the events makes a good story. He wants to stir feelings within his audience. He wants to hold their attention. He wants to focus their perceptions, make them laugh, make them cry, make them think. Why? Because that is what a storyteller does. For a storyteller that is enough – more than enough.

But is the story true?

Alan Moore lurches forward, his eyes wide and burning into yours like twin embers in the twilight.

"All stories are true," Alan says. "Every last one of them. All myths, all legends, all fables. If you believe them true, then they are true. If you don't believe them, then all that can be said is that they are true for someone else."

There are probably more stories about Heaven and Hell, more widely differing perceptions, theories and speculations about their respective natures, structures, laws and appearances than there are about any other unverifiable concepts (locations?) in human history.

Neil Gaiman once told Viktor after a visit to Anaheim, California, that he is quite certain that somewhere in the southern hemisphere (possibly the Andes Mountains) there is a small-scale replica of Disneyland, ac-

curate to the most minute detail. All of the buildings and amusements are as black as pitch and, within its confines, every unspeakable horror known to man is carried out on a daily basis. The ebony streets run red with the blood of innocents.

Like any good story which merges fact with speculation, it explains a great deal.

Of course, once the collective mind of Man began to accumulate an ever wider array of verifiable facts — once those troublesome Greeks introduced logic and sequential reasoning (essentially storytelling which consisted exclusively of verifiable story elements, combining the most satisfying elements of free expression and bricklaying) — the inherent loyalty of the storyteller shifted from religion to science. A good, solid "why the sun rises in the east and sets in the west" yarn just didn't have the same "oomph" once Copernicus had had his say. While his story wasn't as interesting, it was more plausible. As any storyteller who sought to merge fact with speculation could tell you, a plausible story beat an implausible story hands down. Everything else was just smoke and mirrors.

The centuries-long process of changing stories (theories) into story elements (verifiable facts) from the vantage point of the storyteller amounted to a "reverse alchemy": Changing gold into lead. The wider the range of facts which needed to be accommodated to make a story plausible, the less room there was for the storyteller to make his story interesting (either to himself or his audience). $E=MC^2$ scores high marks in the plausibility rankings, but, to say the least, it lacks a little something in the poetry department.



Viktor Davis rose from his white chair and stretched. He massaged the muscles in the small of his back, wincing as he did so. He moved forward a few feet, interposing himself, eclipsing the distant white light, throwing himself into full silhouette, casting a shadow much taller than himself across the entire breadth of the stage.

"What do you suppose Leonardo da Vinci might have painted if left entirely to his own devices? What if, instead of a religious picture for the Church or a portrait of an interchangeable wife of some interchangeable nobleman, someone...some odd stranger or other... had handed him a fat purse full of gold coins and told him to paint what he wanted to paint?"

Viktor Davis smiled.

"There's a story idea."

He lit another cigarette.

"You know, I'm only slightly more comfortable about this than you are," he said suddenly, turning toward his reader. It wasn't immediately clear whether this was a general observation or if he was referring to something specifically. "*Cerebus* is like that," he said. "It's comfortable and then it's uncomfortable. I always know what's up ahead. Last year — the last two years — have been comfortable. The first half of *Mothers & Daughters* was a real crowd-pleaser. It was intended that way–the picking up of old plot threads, the *Sandman* parody. I knew that *Reads* was going to be different. It wasn't safe. As the story changed, I changed. I wasn't writing in the comfortable little space that I've built for myself. I was back out at the edge of...whatever you want to call it. The abyss, I guess. Out where the ground is shaky and you never know how secure it's going to be or for how long. I remember writing my first 'practice swing' at the Chicago Comicon last summer. When I finished it, the thought came into my head: *stick that up your ass if you don't like it*, which made me smile. Then, *stick it up a little further if you do*, which compelled me to laugh uncontrollably for about a half an hour."

He took another drag from his cigarette.

"There are people who will give you a purse full of gold and tell you to do whatever you want. And then there are people who will give you a handful of silver coins and figure that entitles them to sit on your shoulder and guide your drawing hand the way an air traffic controller guides an airplane. The customer is always right, right? Anyone who doesn't believe that is an asshole. Anyone who doesn't believe that is a prick. Anyone who doesn't believe that is arrogant. Do I think I'm better than you? Huh? Is that it?"

He flicked his cigarette and the ash pinwheeled away from him into the darkness.

"It would never occur to me, sitting at an Eric Clapton concert, to wonder if Eric Clapton thought he was better than me. Eric Clapton is on the stage. I'm in the audience. What more is there to say?"

"For any creativity of any kind, there are as many audiences as there are observers. Audiences. Always plural."

He took another drag from his cigarette and smiled (or perhaps he didn't. His silhouetted features were indistinct).

"I know. All of this is trying your patience. It's all very interesting to you (well, *some* of you, anyway), but what does it have to do with the story? All of that stuff about Alan Moore seemed to be leading up to something."

Viktor Davis stepped closer to the reader until they

were almost touching. The smell of cigarette smoke was an almost visible thing, rising from his clothing. Viktor Davis stepped a couple of paces to his left. The reemergent light was unexpected and nearly blinding in its intensity.

"Yes. It's leading up to something," he was saying as he stepped farther out of the reader's field of vision. "Everything is getting much closer together now. You, me. The story."

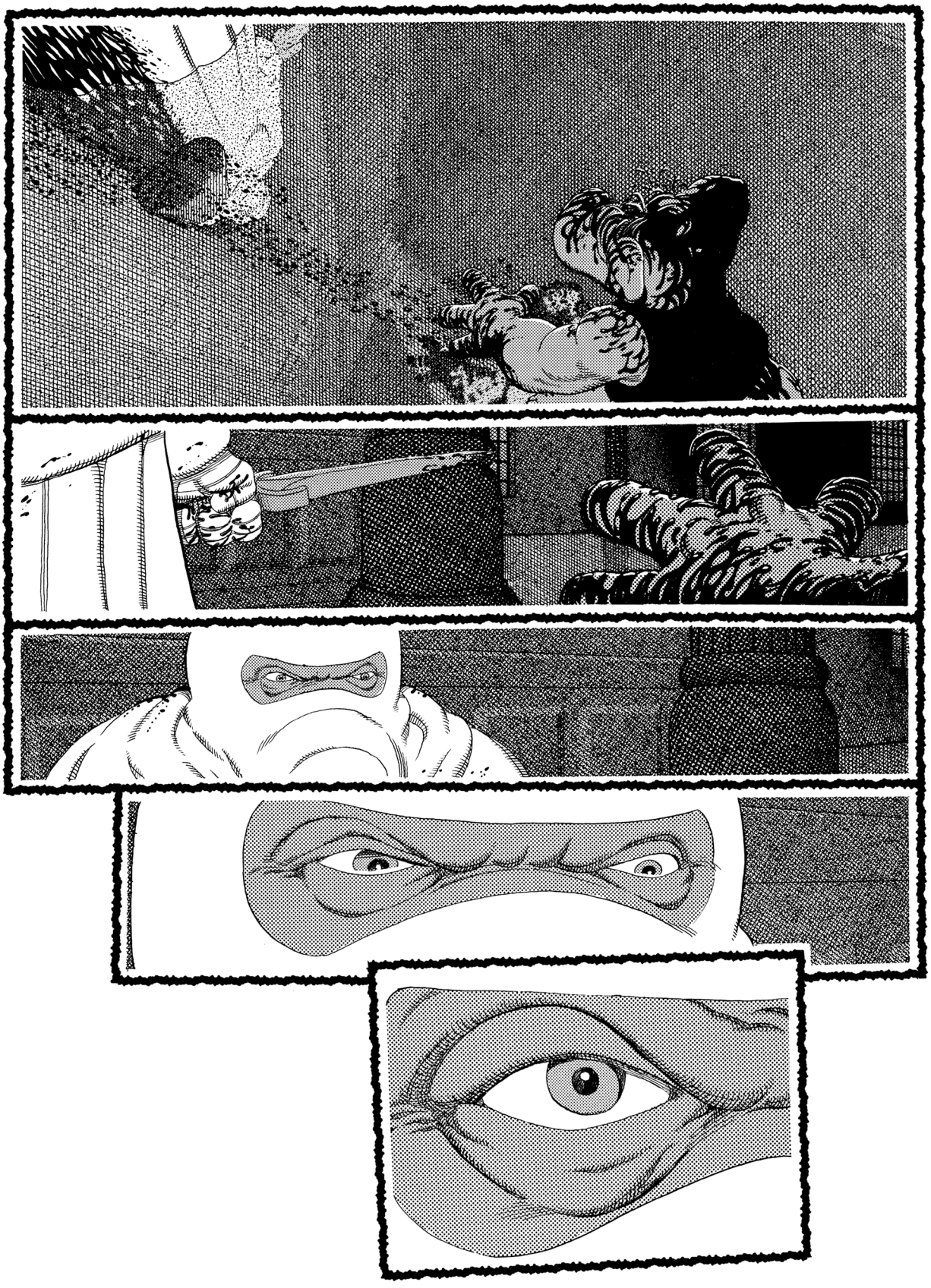
The reader could feel the light caress of Viktor Davis' breath tickling the inside of the reader's right ear. The stench of cigarette smoke at such close proximity was nearly overpowering. Viktor Davis was quiet for several seconds and when he spoke it was in a voice which was barely a whisper.

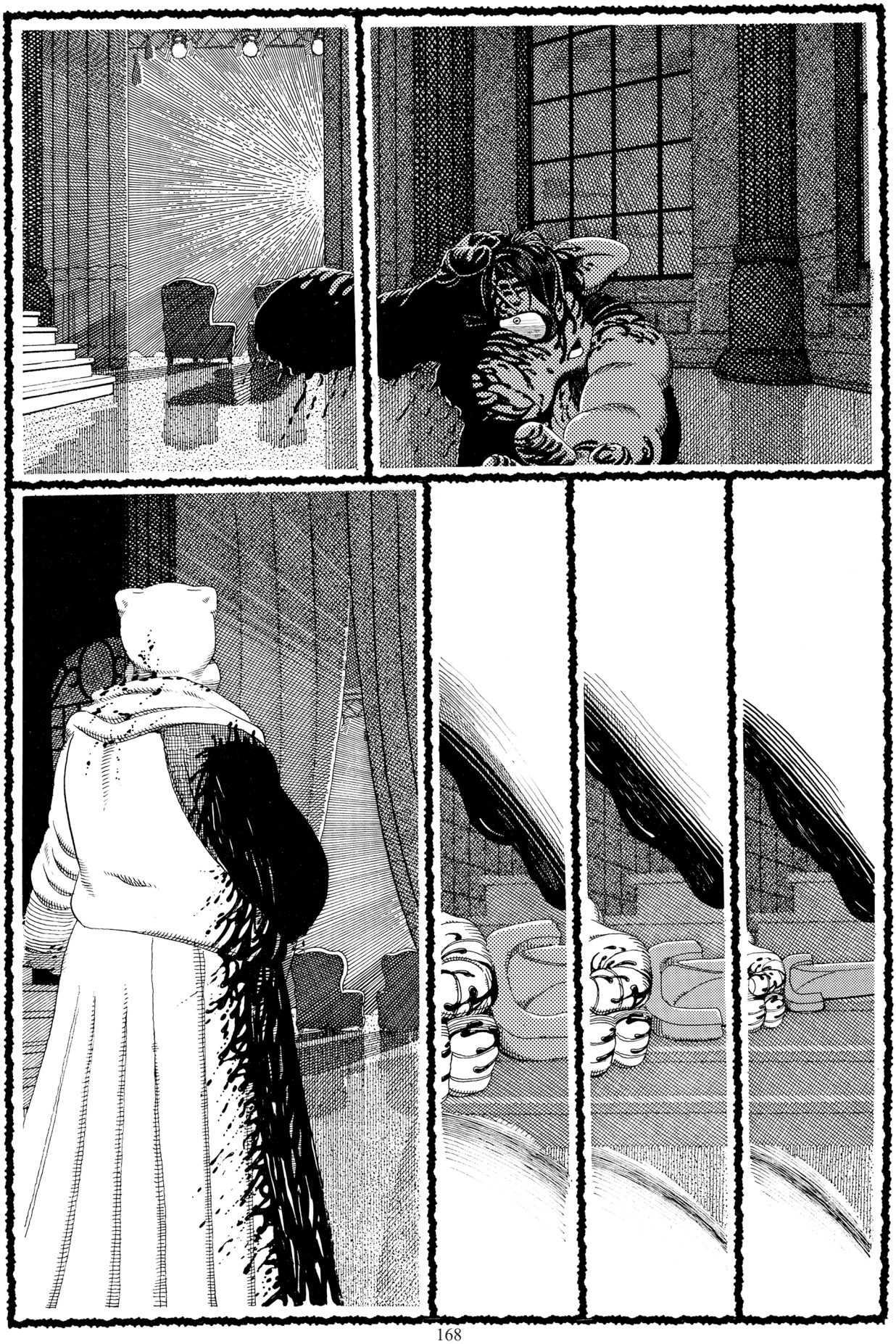
"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

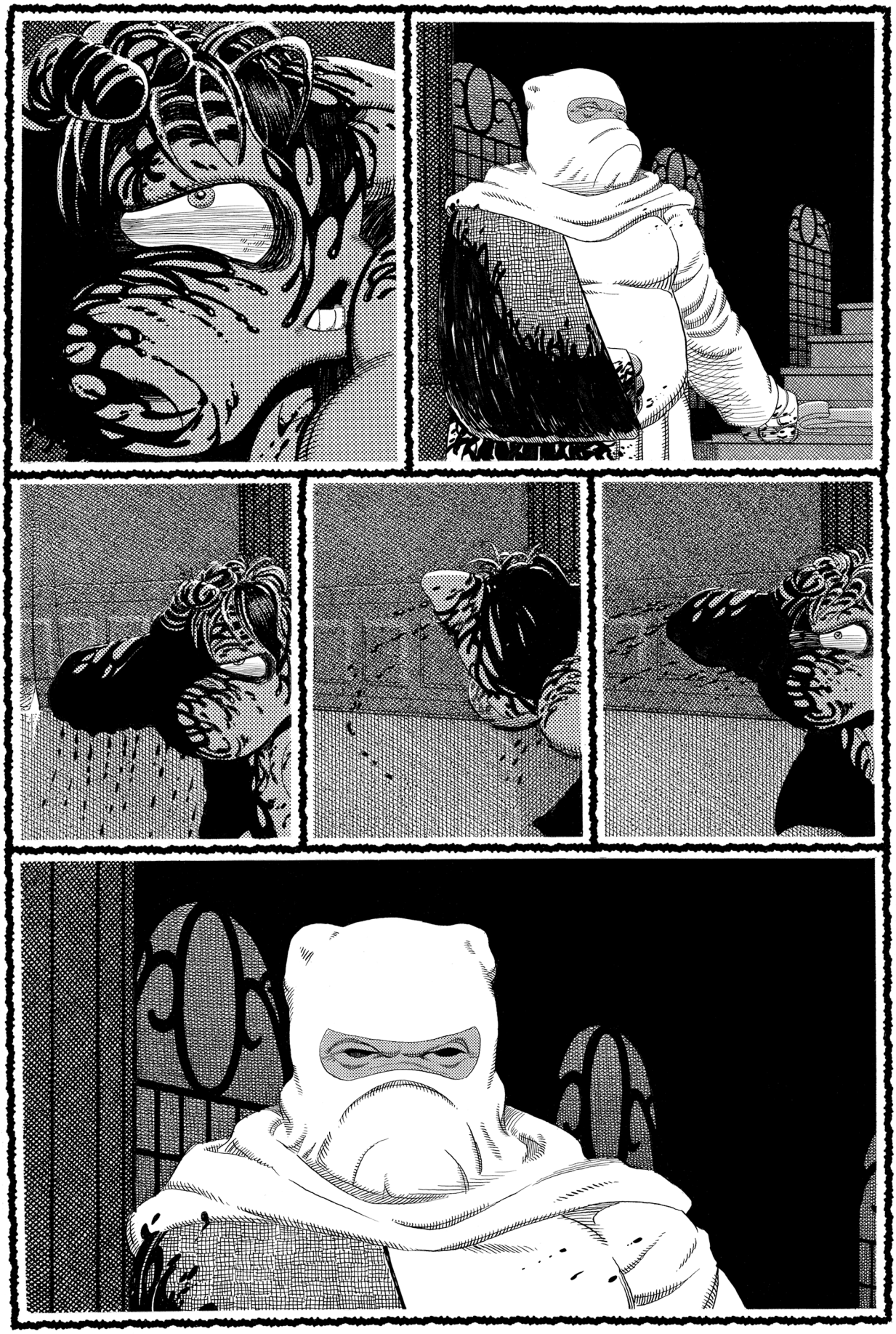
There was the crackling, muffled sound of tobacco leaves catching fire. A concentrated spot of heat flared into existence on the surface of the reader's right cheek: almost, but not quite, painful. And then it was gone. A jet of blue-gray smoke curled into the path of the white light which threw off wave-like beams of light and shadow which varied and shifted in their degrees of darkness, swimming in irregular motions and nonpatterns concentrically about the glowing center.

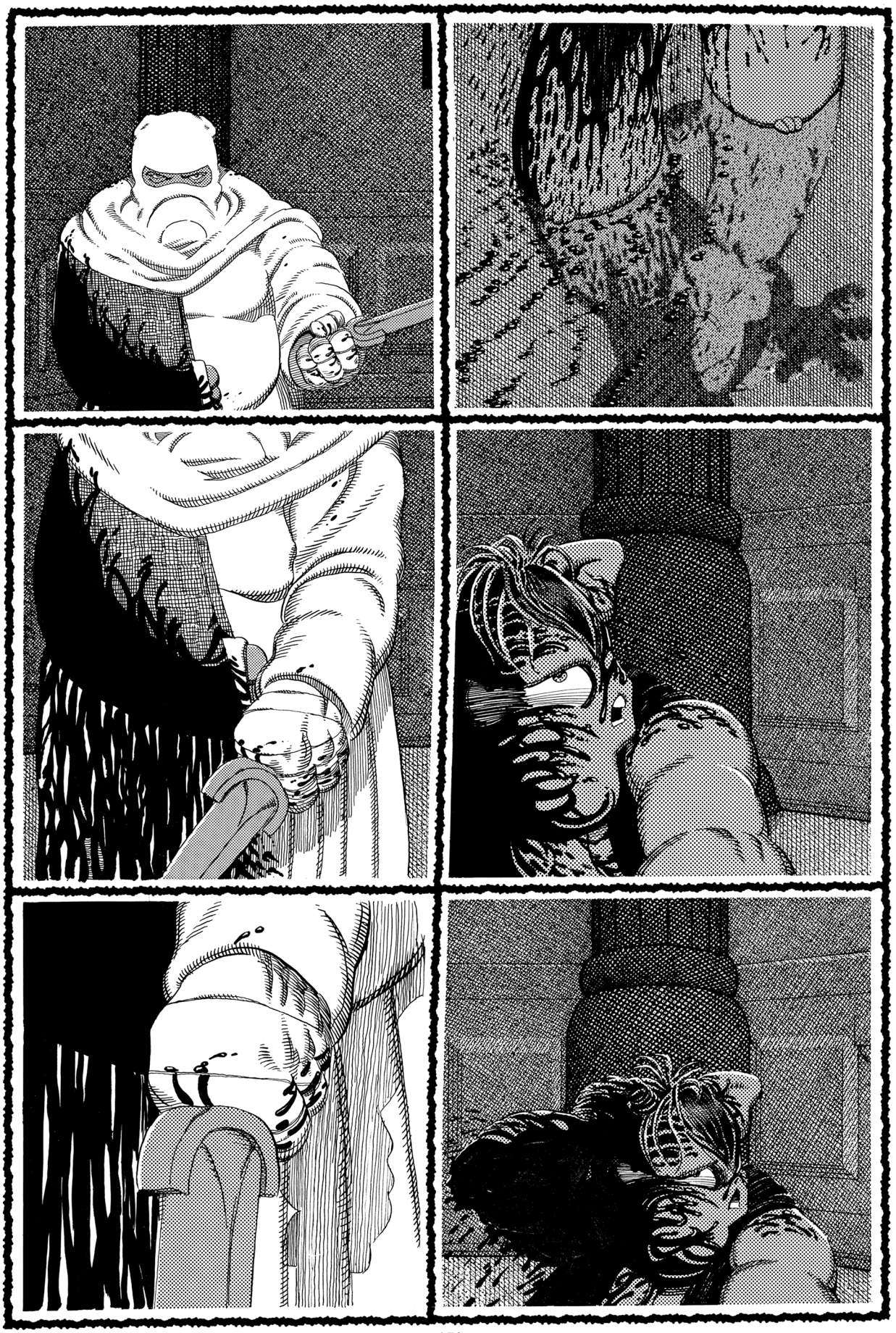
There was the sound of the squeak-squeak-squeak of Viktor Davis' sneakers retreating, fading, vanishing. The white light narrowed, focused, concentrated, enclosing and confining the reader in a small, slightly elliptical circle of light.

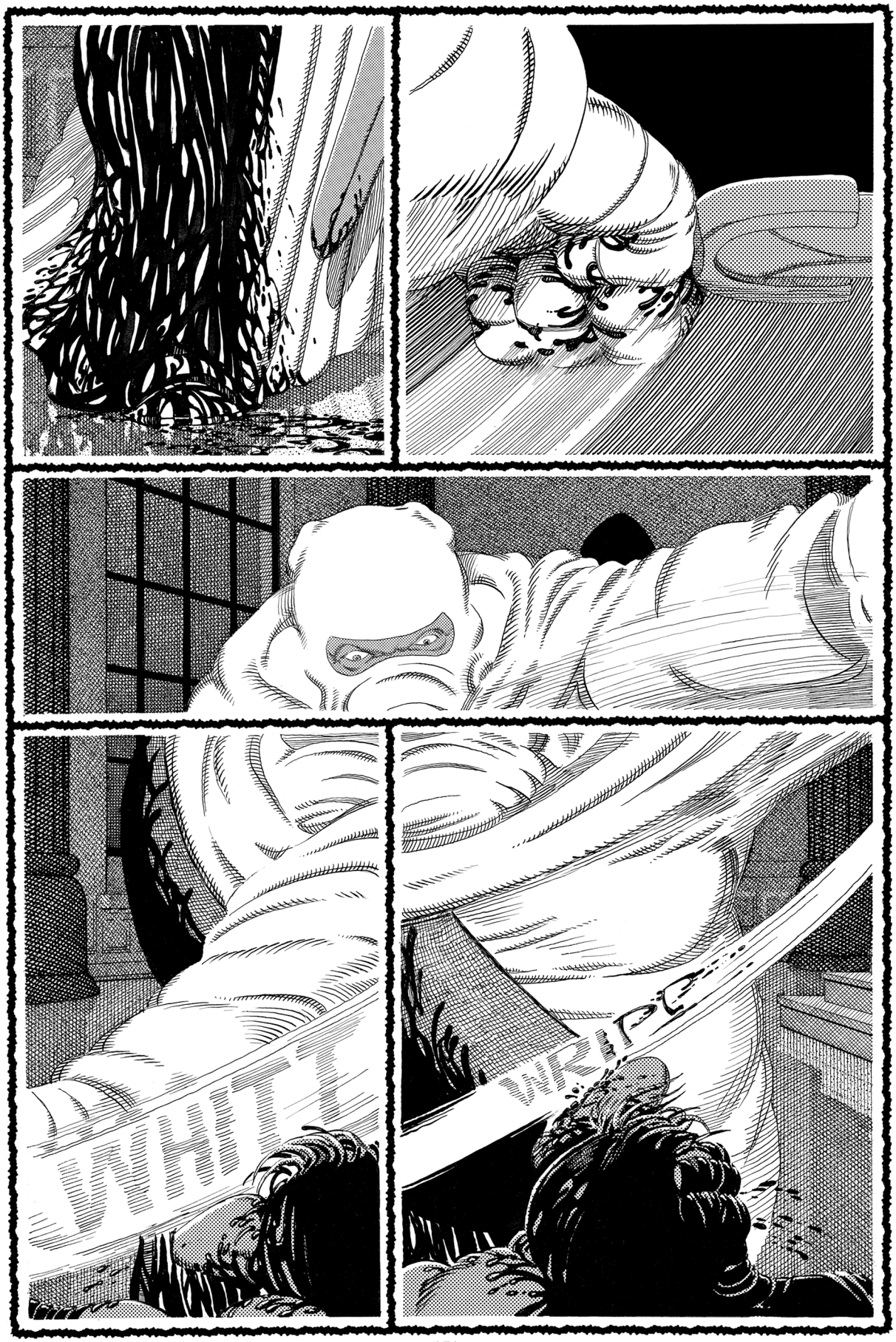
It was very quiet.

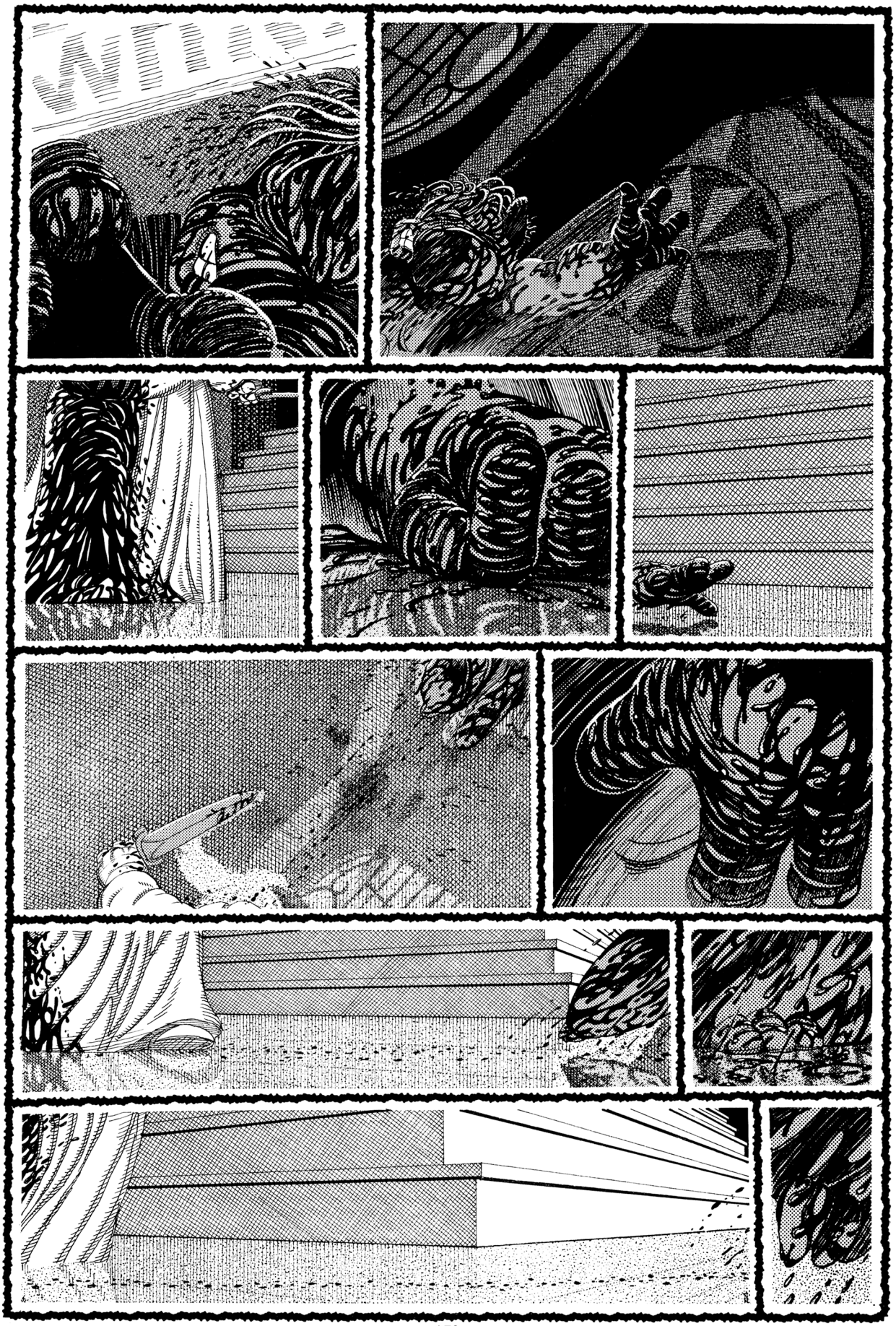


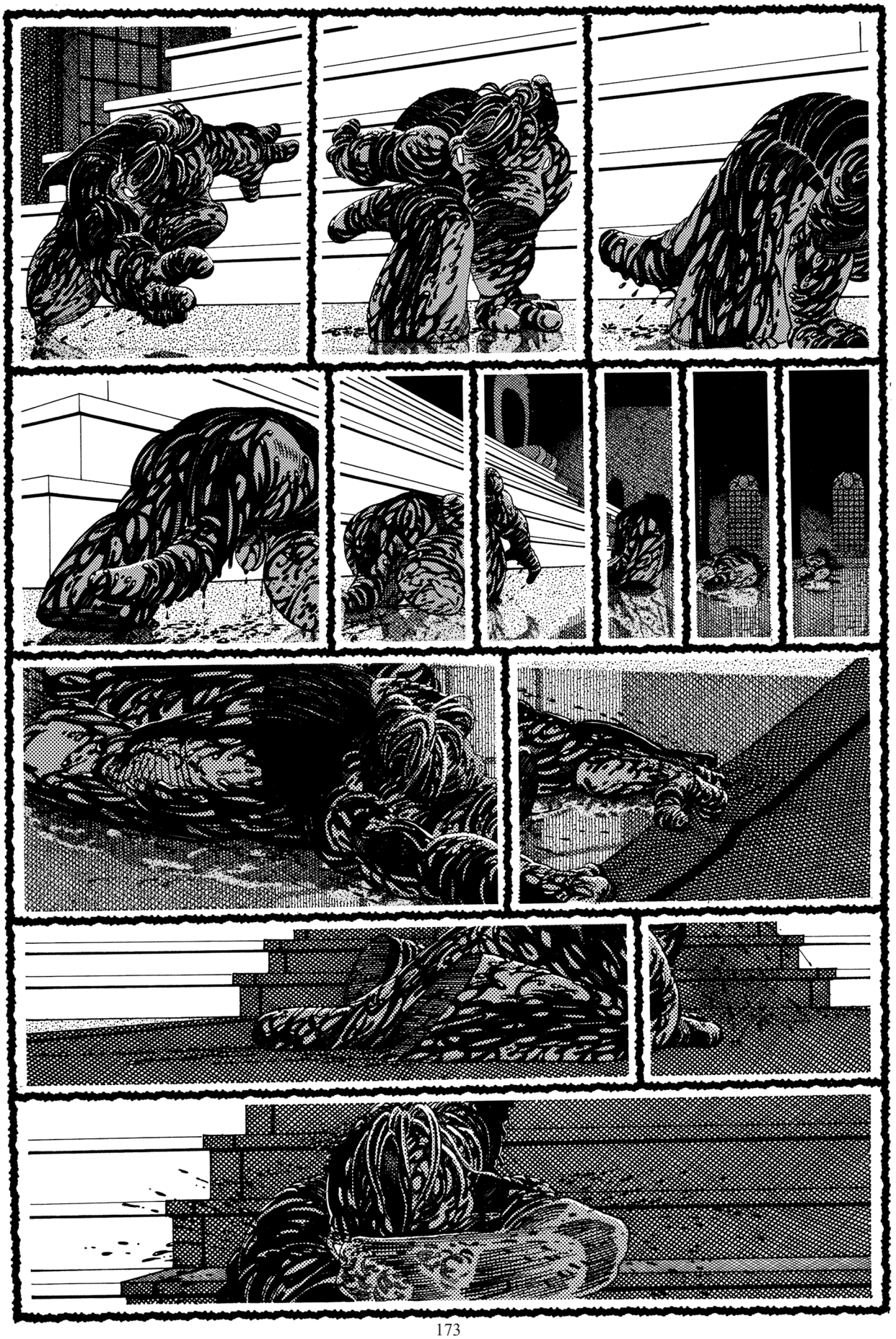


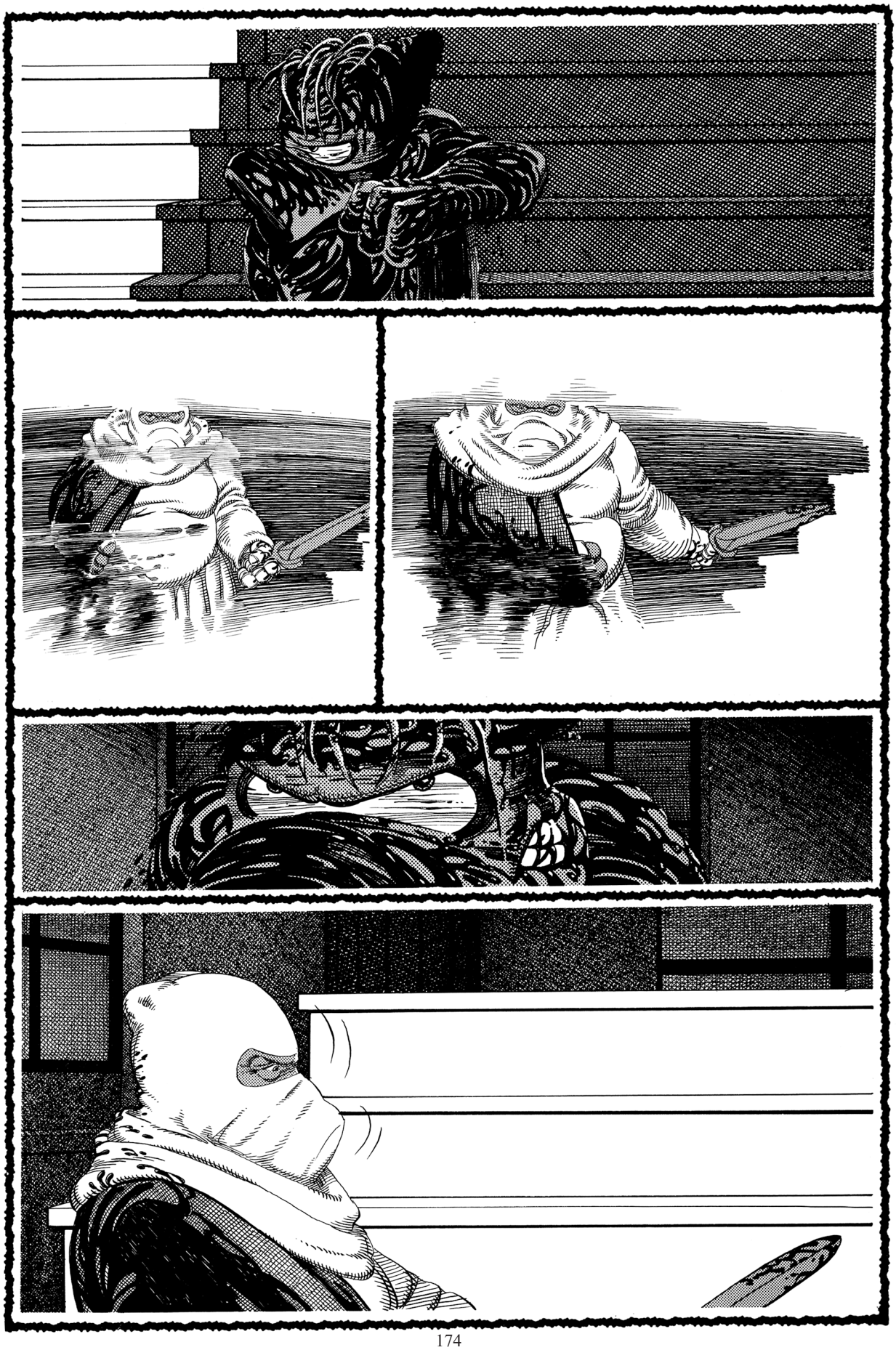


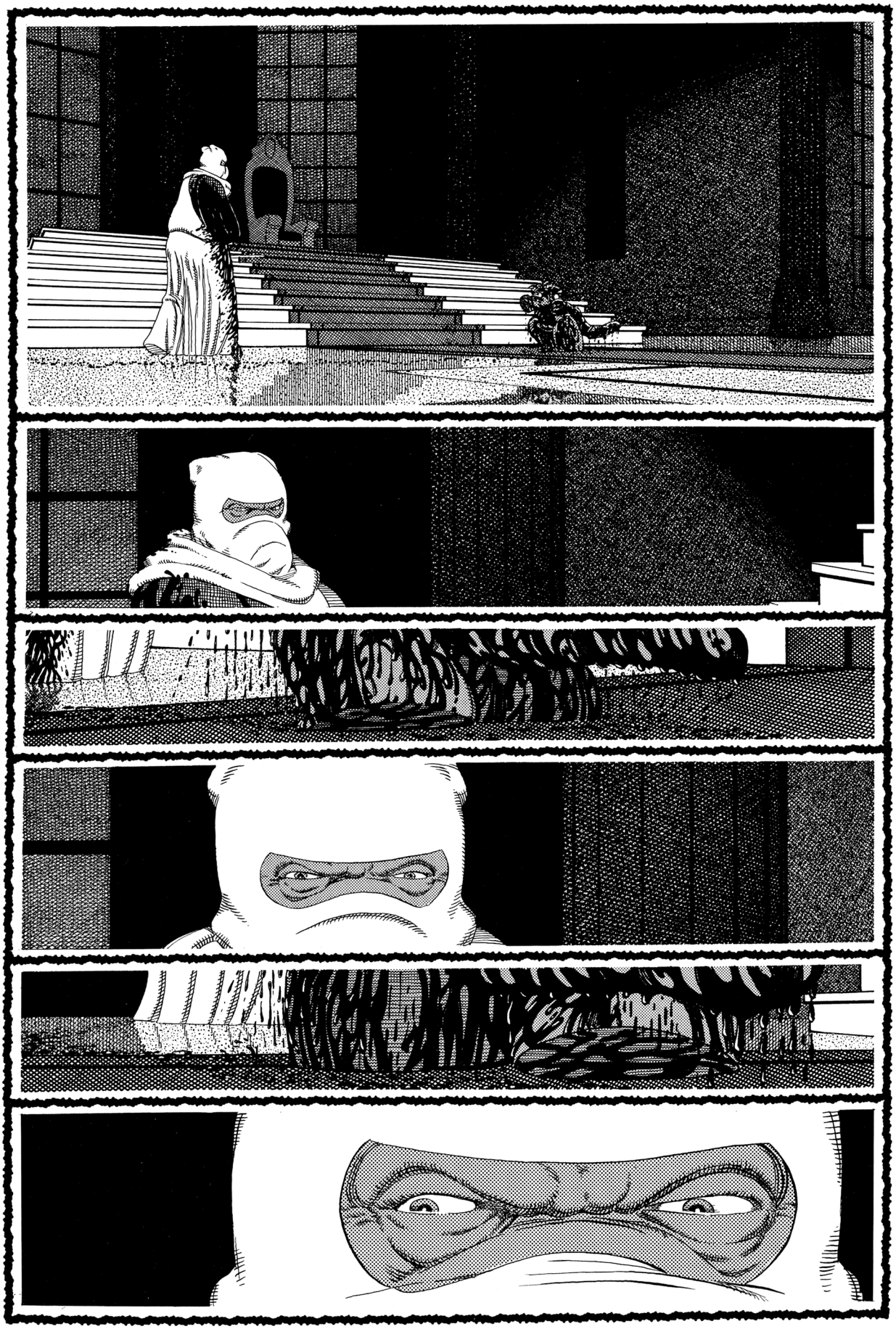


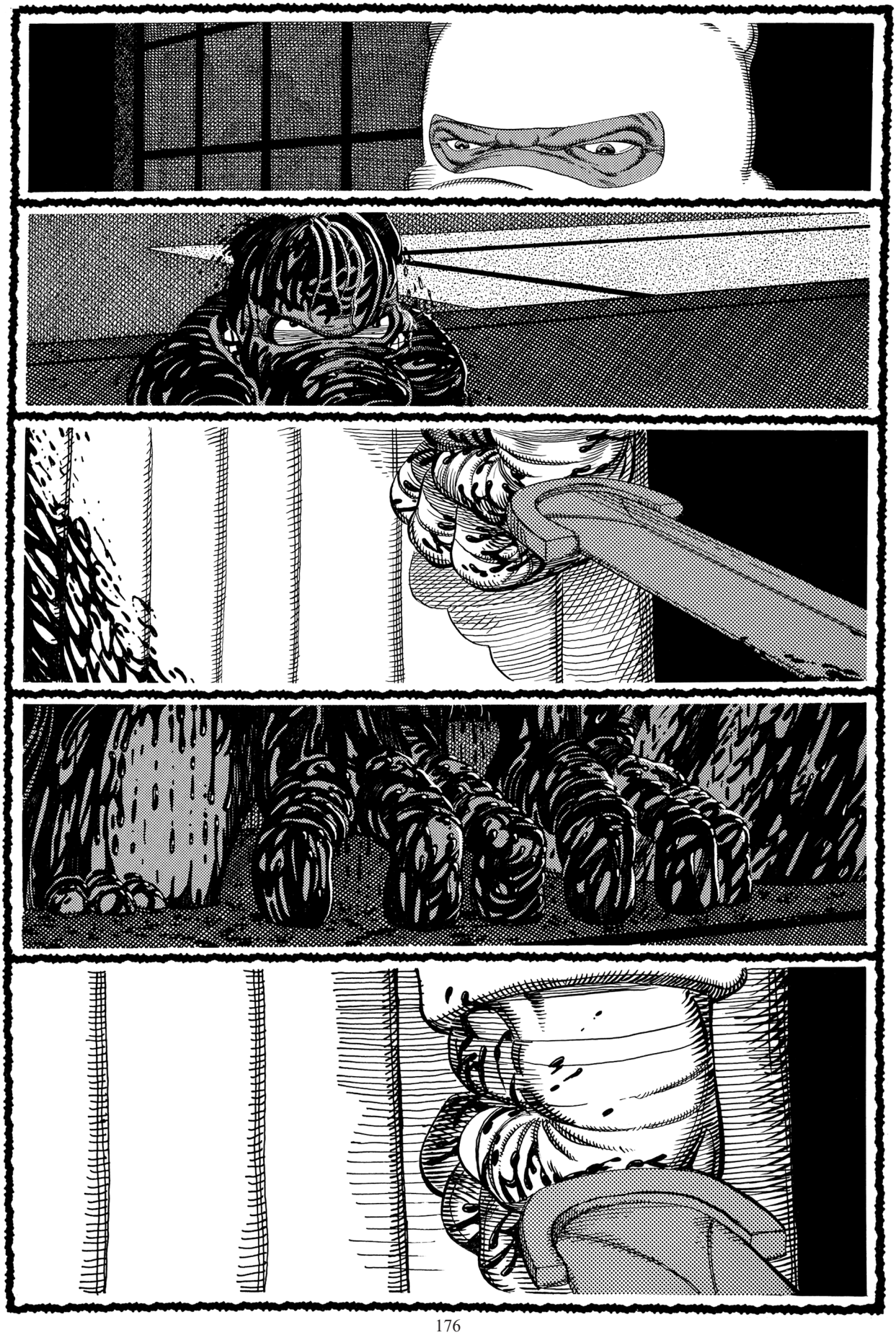


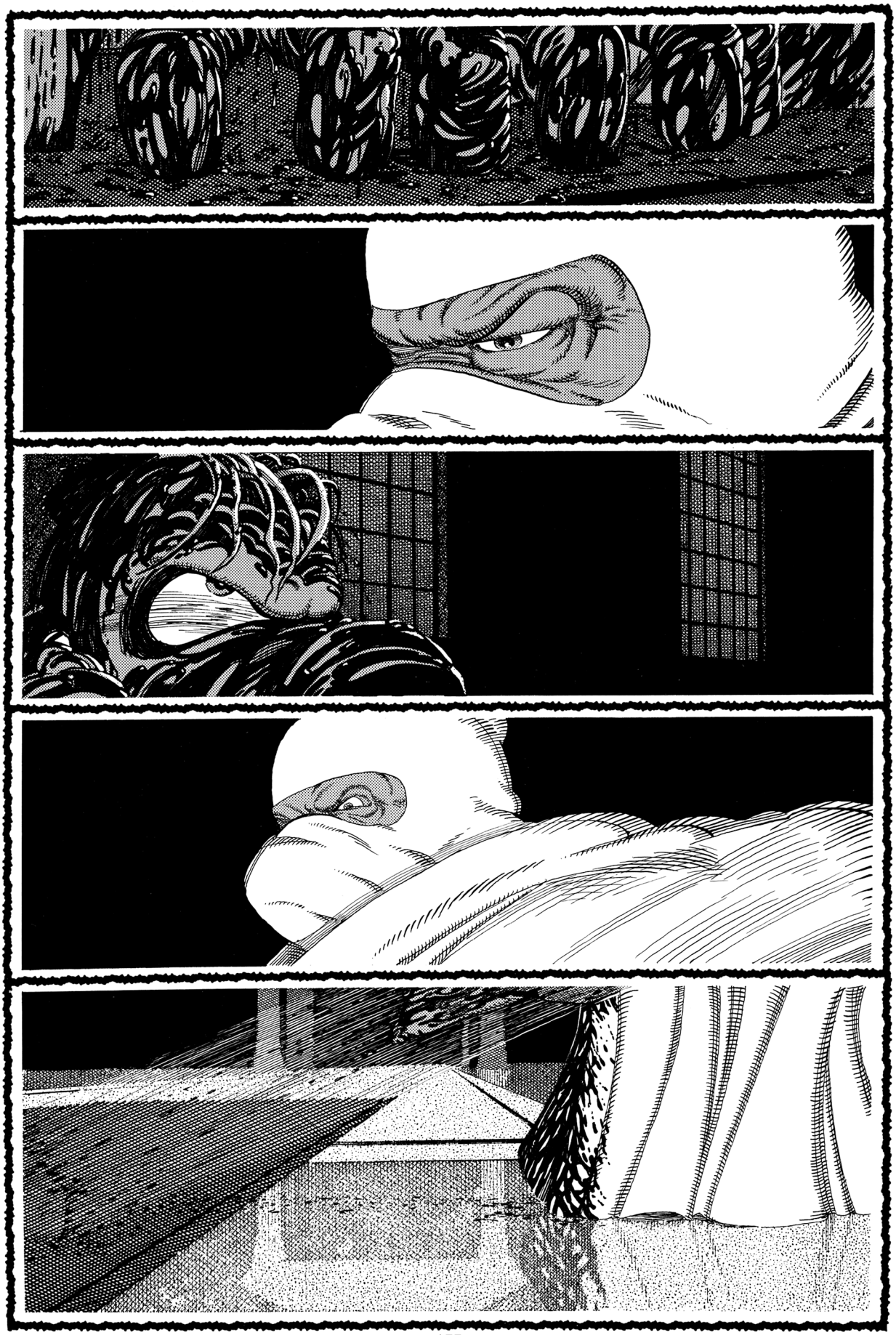


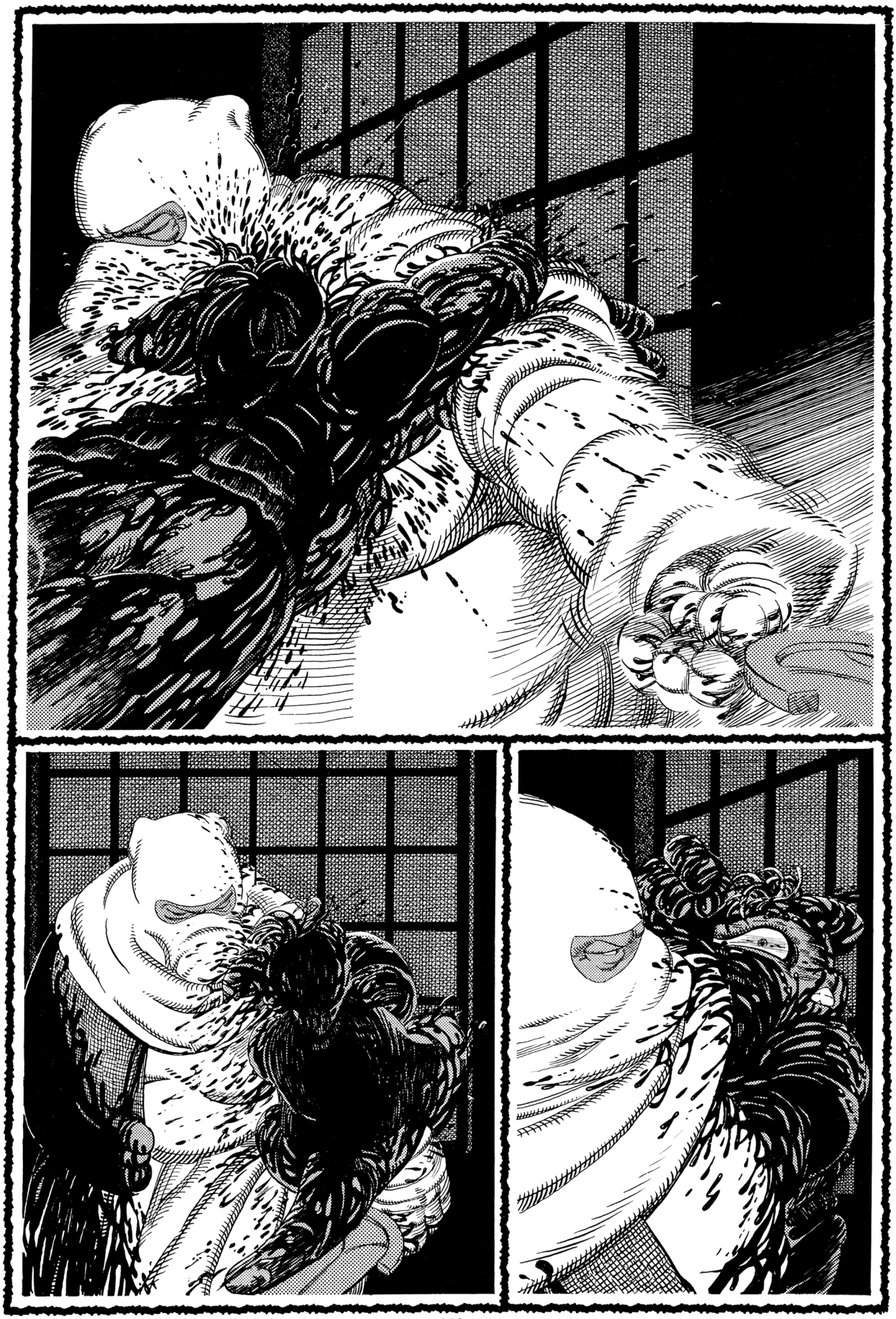


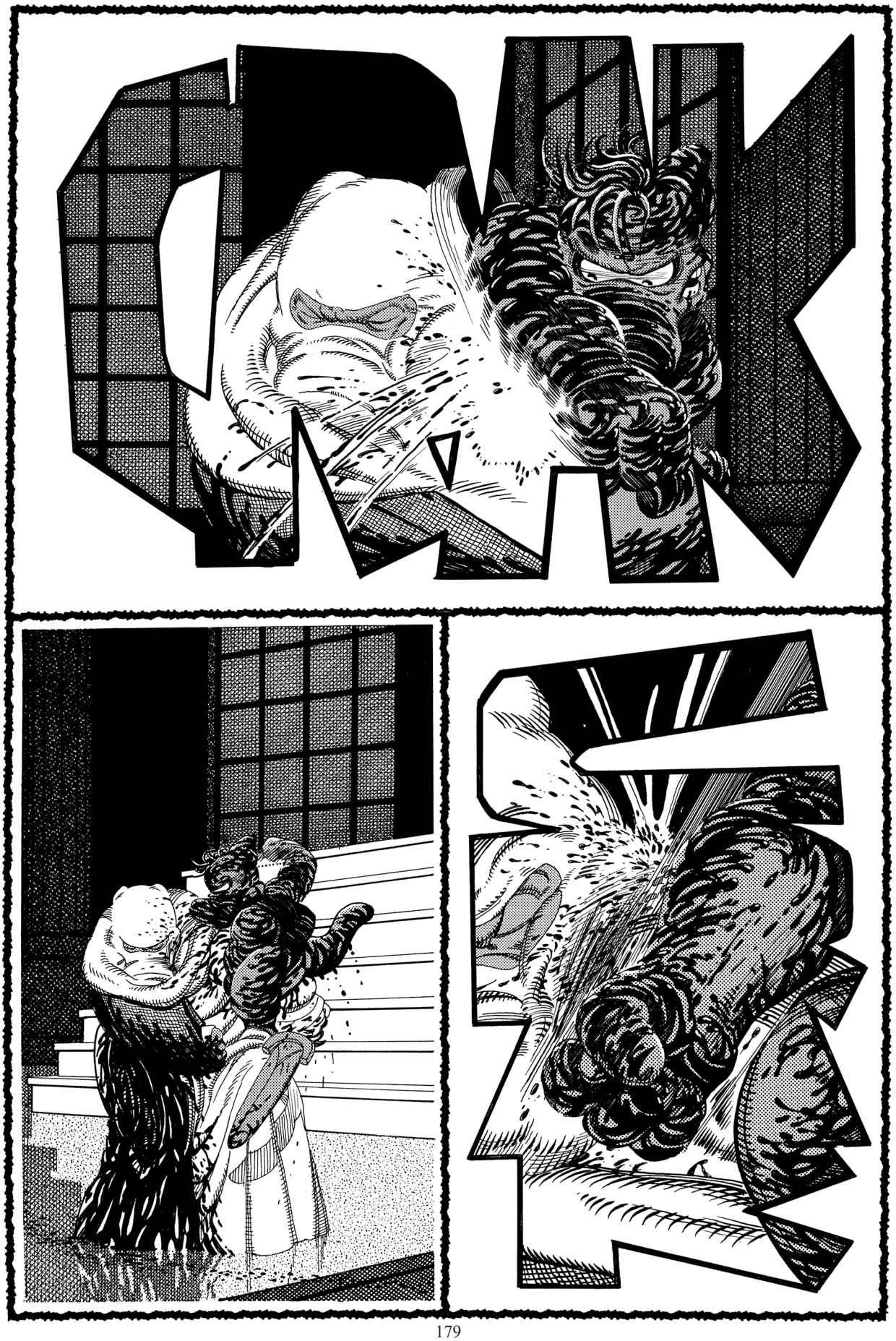












The distant white spotlight dimmed slowly, gathering its radiance to itself, drawing that radiance relentlessly inward. The white became less pure, scintillating with spikes of colour-dagger points of red and yellow and blue which pierced the darkness. Presently, these abbreviated themselves into hard needles which conducted a single wave of prismatic perfection about the circumference of the yellowing circle.

And then, the light was gone.

All was darkness then. The reader remained motionless for a time, reflecting on Viktor Davis' strange words. We're getting much closer together now, he had said: Viktor Davis, the reader and the story. The reader had felt a peculiar rush of air as the curtains had parted, a strange sense of disorientation as the reader watched Cirin watching the back of the reader's chair. The intensity of Cirin's gaze had been a terrible thing to experience. It was as if everything in her path – the very molecules of the air – grew heavier, denser, within the field of her vision. Even at a distance of dozens of meters, even through the substance of the chair, there had been a crushing, oppressive force exerted upon the reader. The reader shuddered at the memory.

Some time passed. The reader blinked several times, turning this way and that, attempting (visually) to adjust to the pervasive surrounding gloom. The darkness was complete, impenetrable. The reader raised a hand and passed it rapidly in front of the reader's eyes at a distance of an inch or two (or not – where there is no light, movement becomes a matter of faith). The reader returned the hand to its place on the arm of the chair, only now the arm itself seemed less substantial. The hand seemed to be resting on something which was without discernible texture.

"There's. . .*some*thing there," Neil Gaiman had said; or, rather, that was what Viktor Davis had said Neil Gaiman had said. All stories are true, Alan Moore had said; or, rather, that was what Viktor Davis had said Alan Moore had said.

More time passed. The reader waited for something to happen, some word to be spoken; the reader waited for the light to return; the reader waited for some sign, some new reality, invoked by words or an image rendered in Gerhard-thin pen strokes, to present itself.

And still more time passed.

At last, the reader stood up from the chair as if the gesture itself might remind someone, somewhere, of the reader's existence.

Some vital link had been severed and the reader had a sense of vulnerability, which the reader found inexplicable. Thinking became a chore. The flotsam and jetsam of Viktor Davis' recent monologue swam in and out of the dark waters of the reader's awareness: the cookies on the plate at Viktor's grandparents' house in Pebble Beach (or whatever it was called; it was something like that, the reader was certain). Was that true? Had Viktor Davis really lost a year and some months of his life? "All stories are true," Viktor Davis had said Alan Moore had said.

More time passed and the reader grew tired of standing. The reader sighed (at least the reader thought it was a sigh – no sound was discernible) and turned to brace a hand against the armchair and resume a sitting position.

The chair was gone.

The reader waved a hand in the enfolding gloom, undulating it slowly in the vicinity of the chair's former position, seeking the arms, the back, the seat. The reader stretched forward, fingers splayed, endeavouring to widen the parameters of exploration. The reader shuffled a few steps in the direction of Viktor Davis' chair. Baby steps. The reader had no urge to bark a shin against something (what?) in the darkness. There was nothing there. *Vertigo Horse*, the reader thought and then wondered why the name of Victor Reid's publishing company had crossed the reader's mind. Vertigo Horse. All stories are true. The cookies are for Santa Claus.

The reader thought of sensory deprivation tanks and felt the first indications of butterflies rising within, taking vibratory flight...of course they weren't *really* (all stories are true) butterflies. The reader crouched down, seeking the floor with both hands. The left hand touched what felt to be flagstones or perhaps cobblestones. The right hand found hard, ribbed plastic, like a mat intended for overshoes. As the reader moved each hand in a wide arc, the textures changed. Warm metal, brick, wallpaper, splintered wood, industrial carpeting, lightly adhesive paper, cardboard. The reader stood once more.

More time passed.

The surrounding air began to cool, as if night were falling. The reader felt (and attempted to suppress) increasing anxiety.

"Viktor? Viktor Davis?"

There was no sound. The reader spoke (or it felt like speech, anyway). The reader's lips had moved (or had they?), there had been a slight expulsion of air (or had there?), but the reader's ears had heard nothing. Perhaps...

Perhaps the reader had gone deaf. Perhaps the reader had gone blind.

Instinctively, the reader raised hands to ears, but a curious thing transpired. The reader *felt* the hands rising against some resistance in the air; some pressure, which made the reader's arms feel heavy. The hands seemed to be rising and then they felt insubstantial. The hands were rising and they were also limp at the reader's sides. The rising hands felt *less* real and the limp hands felt *more* real, until it was uncertain if the hands had ever moved at all. Every part of the reader's body was numb: numbness of the kind which is experienced after the pins-and-needles sensation when an appendage falls asleep. Of course, they aren't *really* (all stories are true) pins and needles and appendages don't *actually* (all stories are true) fall asleep. It felt a little like flu symptoms, as well. There was a sort of giddiness in the reader's joints; all of the reader's nerve endings seemed too sensitive, too exposed, too raw. Any attempted movement multiplied the sensation. When the reader didn't attempt to move, the sensation went away. *Vertigo Horse*, the reader thought again, suppressing a giggle which washed uncomfortably over the reader's spine, like a wire brush across an eyelid. The reader tried rubbing right thumb and index finger together. The nerve endings rebelled against this, as well. It felt as if the index finger and thumb were rubbing against something, but it did not feel as if they were rubbing against each other. Each digit might have been a fully autonomous being, divided one from the other by a distance of many miles, the sensation of touching, itself, as unverifiable as telepathy.

Was the theatre still there? This the reader did not know. The reader attempted a shouted greeting. This time, apart from a discomfiting tremor in the vicinity of the reader's jaw muscles, there was no sensation of the lips having moved, no sensation of air being expelled from the lungs.

And there was no sound.

If the theatre *were* there, were the twenty thousand seats empty or full? The reader felt a sudden certainty that the theatre patrons were all still there, that their experience mirrored the reader's own. There was darkness. There was immobility. Everything was insubstantial. All of them, all twenty thousand were just...waiting.

"Yes, and no."

It was Viktor Davis' voice, but it lacked any characteristic of sound. That is to say, the words were more vividly rendered than had been the stray thought moments before (*Vertigo Horse*). It was Viktor Davis' voice (wasn't it?), but it had made itself known to the reader's awareness by some manner of direct access which was not auditory in nature. The reader thought again of sensory deprivation tanks and hallucinations (all stories are true).

Pinpoints of light appeared, rising in straight lines from the reader's vantage point: like runway lights at an airport, as seen from a great distance. They delineated an inclined plane of some kind, brightening from orange to yellow to white. They reached an optimum level of brilliance, revealing row upon row of empty theatre seats. At the exact moment that the reader perceived this, the very instant that the lights changed from an inexplicable phenomenon and became, instead, theatre floor lights (all stories are true), they began to dim once more, from white to yellow to orange. And then they were gone and all was darkness once more.

Tap tap tap.

It was the soft impact of an index finger striking the reader's right temple. So unexpected, so genuine a sensory experience was this, so...*real* was this, by contrast with the impenetrable blackness and the reader's own benumbed senses, that the experience seemed to echo and reverberate in the reader's awareness, which (now focused and acutely sensitive) replayed the experience, clinging to the sensation and the memory of the sensation as a drowning swimmer might cling to an overturned rowboat.

Tap tap tap.

Viktor Davis laughed.

"You're all in *there*, now."



Nothing more was said, but this new intelligence created an effect within the reader. Claustrophobia, euphoria, anxiety. There was a sense of fragmentation. A babble of voices breached the reader's threshold of perception. It was uncertain if these were conversations or overlapping monologues. As certain voices rose (swimming up from the depths of the reader's awareness) and then fell (sinking downward into incoherence, where little could be discerned beyond inflection and rhythm), bold strokes of green and turquoise leapt into being: a pattern like wallpaper, human faces visible as ghost images swam through the space between reader and pattern. The pattern receded, replicating itself. Sentence fragments, some

typewritten, some handwritten, some represented in computer typefaces, interposed themselves between the reader and the translucent visages: "...Why not use gold logo #0's for something worthwhile like a $25 bid contributed to the defense fund..." "Dear Viktor: I know, I know. You're asking yourself the same question I am: why bother? Why does he bother sending me this stuff?"; "...boy meets girl by invading her homeland castle..."; "...I know the parallels don't leap right out at you, but your focused and positive thinking..."; "...one reader who will not leave his seat until the show is over..."; "...about your funny English words. In Poland where I come from, the word *cunt* means a pleat in a pair of trousers..."

The receding pattern revealed itself to be the cover to *Cerebus* 181. As it receded, as the cover became visible in its entirety, the overlapping layers of faces and words became too small to distinguish one from another. The babble of voices subsided entirely as the cover receded still further, growing smaller and smaller. The faces and the words began to resemble the rings of Saturn, locked in a slow orbit about the gleaming green rectangle and the smaller white square it contained. The cover hung suspended in the distance, as if it were a solitary picture in some otherworldly exhibition, brightly lit by some indirect and invisible light source.

All else was blackness and silence.



The reader continued to gaze at the distant image, hypnotised by it. After a time, the "rings" were visible only when viewed indirectly: at the periphery of the reader's field of vision.

Something struck the reader's arm. The reader felt the grip of a hand, briefly, on the reader's left bicep. Then the hand seemed to be wrenched away. Flailing fingertips brushed the reader's collarbone. A silhouette of a figure eclipsed the brilliant green of the illuminated cover. The figure turned this way and that, revealing an animated profile in one instant and a symmetrical page-boy hairstyle in the next. The features were strangely familiar, the voice even more so.

"What – ah say – what was *that*? Who's there? Somebody – ah say – somebody put on the nightlight. This joke has gone too far – crossed the boundary, that is. Ah demand mah full rights under the Alan Moore amendment. Ahm a *story*, son – y'can't destroy me... *obliterate*, that is."

Crimson letters scrawled themselves across the inky darkness.

Suddenly, the exciting and charismatic Elrod, the last – ah say – the last ruler of Melvinbone, stepped forward into the Papal Audience Chamber. "Son," he opined, "ah don't mean to tell you your business, but you look about as healthy as a..."

The letters faded from crimson to a rust brown and then seemed to sink into the very blackness itself.

The cover dimmed from a brilliant emerald and turquoise to a muddy olive and navy. And then it, too, was gone.



A small flame flared to life a few feet to the left of the reader. The flame rose up at an angle to reveal the features of Viktor Davis, who was smiling. "There's nothing out here," he said. "Not yet, anyway. Just an idea for the end of issue 183. The rest of *Mothers & Daughters*." He lit his cigarette.

The flame went out.



Where do you get your ideas?

It's a curious sort of question, the question most commonly asked of the storyteller. *From observation* is a common response – but, of course, observation is a neutral act. A dozen storytellers could observe a single event and the stories that they based on that event would all be different. A non-storyteller could observe the same event and likely see nothing in it beyond the event itself. For the non-storyteller *where do you get your ideas?* is not an altogether different question from *where did you get that jacket?* or *who cuts your hair?* At a specific level, small meaning can be read into the question: *I like your ideas. I would like some ideas like that. Where can I get them?* I think it was Spider Robinson who likened writing to hacking your way through dense undergrowth in search of The Filing Cabinet. Sometimes you can push through the foliage for days to no avail. At other times you just look up and there The Filing Cabinet is, in front of you. It's a nice piece of imagery but it fails to answer the question. Like most purported answers, it evades the question entirely: *where did the filing cabinet come from?* and the implicit subtext, *where can I get a filing cabinet just like it?*



It's very common for a storyteller to say that an idea "just came to me". I don't think that's entirely accurate, given that the storyteller's craft is largely concerned with "the invocation of things analogous": things that are like other things and the drawing of new connections between them.

What's that like?

To what is it comparable? With what, in the common range of human experience, can it be connected?

Kennedy's head wound was the Big Bang of the last half of the twentieth century. A short time later, he divides into four component elements: John, Paul, George and Ringo. Robert Kennedy is shot on June 5th and dies June 6th (6668: The Beast of the Apocalypse and the eighth Tarot card – Strength – pictorially represented as a woman calming a lion). *Or...*

The Beatles music compels (Prince) Charles Manson (Man-Son) to brutally murder Sharon Tate (sharing *tête*; *tête* is "head" in French), a blonde actress, practically seven years to the day after the death of Marilyn Monroe (Moon Row). Edward Kennedy is implicated in the death of Mary Jo (Mary and Joseph) Kopechne even as Apollo 11 (the Sun God, two magicians) speeds towards the moon. All of this transpires within a couple of weeks in the summer of '69.

These are ideas.

I *could* say that they just came to me, but it would be more accurate to say that I went to *them*. Ideas – and new connections between ideas – lead you away from commonly held perceptions of reality.

Ideas lead you out here. Ideas lead you into the darkness.



In psychiatric terms, this is called schizophrenia: the inability to differentiate between reality and fantasy. For sixteen years, I've been following ideas – and the connections between ideas – further into the darkness, because that's where the ideas are. The further I've gone, the less real conventional reality has seemed to me. A diagnosis of genuine schizophrenia results when fantasy intrudes upon reality to such an extent that the patient is unable to function in the "real" world. I put the quotes in there because I have to; I defy anyone to come up with a valid working definition of the real world – let alone the "Real World" or the Real World – which is genuinely objective. Family Values? Feminism? The Ku Klux Klan? Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch? Time-Warner? The New York Stock Exchange? The Royal Family? Assuming (for the sake of argument) that I'm crazy and everyone else is sane, what genuine, verifiable, objectively *real* foundation is your sanity based on? What, objectively speaking (or subjectively, if we're being honest here), lends that foundation validity? The thing which lends validity to my schizophrenia (I was diagnosed as a "borderline schizophrenic" in 1979 and I think it reasonable to assume that the condition has "worsened" in the interim) is the fact that I can make a living from it. In a capitalistic society founded upon "choice" as an absolute, that gives me a certain "real world" impunity. If the world of *Cerebus*, of Estarcion, is not real to *me*, then I can't make it real for *you*. If that condition persists, becomes chronic, the flow of currency is shut off and I become just another candidate for a Haldol prescription. I spend about twelve hours a day in the fictional world I've created, eight hours a day sleeping and approximately four hours a day interacting with the "real world". Believe me, those quotation marks *have* to be there.



This is my autobiography. This is as accurate a word picture as I can paint for you of who I am. There is very little regurgitation of past experiences. No boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, boy-ditches/is-ditched-by-girl, no blow-by-blow account of the School Years, the Freelance Years, the Marriage, the Mistress, the Divorce, the Affairs. To document all of these, to pass them off as Truth (or "Truth" or truth or "truth"), would strike me as having about as much validity as doing an in-depth examination of the life of the tree (from seed to sapling to lumber mill) from which was carved the hockey stick used by Wayne Gretzky to break Gordie Howe's record.



Let me take you down
'Cause I'm going to
Strawberry Fields.
Nothing is real...
John Lennon
"Strawberry Fields Forever"

The reader was suddenly aware that they – the reader and Viktor Davis – were moving. So intent had been the reader's focus upon the orange (and intermittently red) dot which was the tip of Viktor Davis' cigarette (or was it?) that a spider web of traces had burned itself into the reader's retinae: endeavouring, it seemed, to capture or (at least) restrain the small, bobbing spot of illumination. It was not until the *squeak squeak squeak* sound of Viktor Davis' sneakers and the sensation of the reader's legs moving rose (simultaneously) within the reader's consciousness that realisation came: and with it an implied question. How long had they been walking?

Viktor Davis laughed.

The sound was not reassuring.



Quite a while. Quite a while. For some of you five years, ten years, sixteen years.

One word, one picture at a time, I'm leading you into the darkness. Not *out* of the darkness. *Into* the darkness. You could say that I have control. You could say that you have control. At any time, you could put this comic book down and go and watch television or wash your hair or something. You could decide never to buy another issue.

There was a very good review of Steve Bissette's *Taboo* anthology that came out a while ago entitled "Don't Read This". That's very good, don't you think? Don't read this. If you stop reading, you have control. If you keep reading, I have control. Don't read this.



Elvis Presley died on the anniversary of Madonna's birth.

Elvis' mother had died on the same day, at the same age Elvis would die some years later: forty-two.

What does that mean? It means a great deal to me (certainly a good deal more than what passed for news in the paper I read this morning). I see great significance in those three events taking place on the same day. What is the significance? Uh-uh. Doesn't work that way. What does it mean to you? Just a coincidence? I see. Of course, you know the word "coincidence" is not an explanation.

Question: Why did those three events take place on August 16?

Answer: Those three events took place on August 16.

Removing the word "why" from a question does not change a question into an answer. Not for me, anyway.

Not out here.



1977.

That was the year that Elvis died; it was the year Groucho and Charlie Chaplin died as well. It was the year the Voyager spacecraft was launched.

Into the darkness.

Some years later, the Voyager spacecraft accomplished its flyby of the planet Saturn. The pictures transmitted back to Earth were extraordinary (I used to be quite an astronomy nut. Did I ever tell you that? No, I didn't think so). I remember the close-up of the Rings. Thousands and thousands of Rings. I remember the stir it caused at Johnson Space Center when one of the pictures showed several of the Rings were braided.

"Saturn's saying hello."

It was a voice in my head that was not my own.

Saturn's saying "hello" to the DNA.



The reader stumbled as the ground shifted, suddenly, beneath the reader's feet. There had been some kind of impediment and then a shallow crater or a pothole. One, two, three awkward steps and the reader had recovered a semblance of balance. In the distance, Viktor Davis' cigarette was motionless, glowing at the reader's eye level. The reader paused a moment and then stepped (this time more carefully) in the direction of the glowing orange dot.

The orange dot resumed its journey.



Word by word. Picture by picture. Into the darkness. I remember Zolastraya saying to me in a peak moment of frustration, "According to you, everything is shit. Nothing is worthwhile." Various women have said the same thing to me at various times, under various circumstances and in various ways.

It's certainly not the way that I feel. It's not what I think.

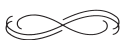
Everything isn't shit. Everything is everything.

Worthwhile? Worth a while? This cigarette is worth a while. Beer is worth a while. Sex is definitely worth a while. But how long is a while? Several minutes? An hour? Three weeks? A year-and-a-half?

A lifetime?

Worthwhile.

squeak squeak squeak



December 8, 1980, at approximately 11:20 p.m., Viktor Davis had been sitting at his drawing board, hard at work on the twenty-fourth issue of *Cerebus*. Less than a year before, he had announced for the first time that the storyline would run three hundred issues. He was in the middle of lettering "Blinky Boar and the Strawberry Patch" and humming "Strawberry Fields Forever" to himself when the local radio station interrupted its programming for a news bulletin.

"Possibilities for a Beatles reunion were dashed at eleven o'clock tonight when John Lennon was shot to death outside his Manhattan apartment building..."

That night, Viktor Davis decided that *Cerebus* would not run for three hundred issues. He decided that *Cerebus* would run for two hundred issues. Viktor Davis decided to keep this a secret, telling no one for fourteen years.

He would not announce it until issue #183, a year and five months before the end: November 1995.



The reader felt the ground become unstable, felt it wobble uncertainly like a table with four legs of different lengths. Instinctively, the reader took several tentative steps in the direction of the orange dot, the lone definable fixture in the hard and stygian darkness of the reader's reality. With each step, the ground began to tilt farther and farther forward. The air temperature dropped several degrees as the reader's arms pinwheeled ineffectively. At last, the angle of the ground had slipped so far out of the horizontal that the reader was pitched forward, headlong, into the blackness.

The reader's hands braced for the impact.

When it came, a moment later, the surface that was struck seemed strangely elastic in its nature, almost trampoline-like. The reader's hands and knees impressed themselves into it to a depth of several inches. This new surface began to change its texture. Solidity (of a kind) began to reassert itself. The elasticity was gone, replaced by a nearly impossible smoothness, as if the (ground? floor?) were a frictionless surface. Through the nerve endings in the reader's palms, no sensation could be perceived. They seemed to rest on a film of fine oil or a layer of powder which began to vibrate strangely, rhythmically, rocking the reader back and forth in place. Then the surface began to tilt forward and the reader could feel that the reader's hands were now noticeably lower than were the reader's feet. Blood began to rush to the reader's head and the sound of the reader's heartbeat, even as it quickened its tempo, became audible. The reader began to slide. The reader began to slide headfirst into the darkness, into the unknown.

Instinctively, the reader endeavoured to swing around, to bring legs and feet forward, but there was no purchase to be had. As the angle of the surface steepened, the reader began to accelerate. A dozen yards, a hundred, two hundred. Faster and still faster. The reader's mouth and throat went dry.

The surface dropped away beneath the reader and now the reader was airborne, hurtling through the darkness, dropping like a stone at a velocity of thirty-two feet per second per second. Falling. Falling.

The reader struck something, a new surface, a new ground, a new reality. The reader's momentum carried the reader forward, straining against this new surface, which was dense but resilient. The surface curved up and away, centrifugal force pressing the reader hard against it, squeezing the reader's breath from the reader's lungs. The surface levelled out and the reader gulped air as the sound of the reader's own heartbeat, impossibly fast, a trip-hammer staccato, grew to a deafening loudness in the reader's ears. The surface rose in a gentle curve, carrying the reader with it until the reader could feel a sense of weightlessness taking hold. And then the surface fell away again, dropping precipitously into the blackness. The surface arched up and then down, up and then down beneath the reader. Falling away and then impacting, falling away and then impacting, until the reader felt like a rubber ball bouncing from wave to wave.

Gradually, the surface ceased its punishing wave-like motion.

The surface seemed to rise beneath the reader's hands and settle beneath the reader's feet.

Almost imperceptibly, over several seconds, the reader's forward momentum slowed. The lubrication beneath the reader's hands became thinner in spots. With the reemergence of texture came friction. The reader felt a raw warmth tearing at the reader's palms, small bits of skin stripping away. The surface became less elastic and the reader could feel the relentless tug of gravity, moving down from head to shoulders to chest to abdomen and, finally, along the full length of the reader's body.

The reader slid to a complete stop.



For some minutes, the reader lay prone. The reader's chest ached as the reader convulsively drew ragged breath upon ragged breath. The reader coughed involuntarily, the reader's body attempting to heave phlegm upwards from the throat, endeavouring to replace the long-absent saliva. The saliva returned, bit by bit, mixing with the acrid coppery taste of the phlegm. Lungs, throat and heart seemed locked in a bitter struggle for dominance. The reader swallowed and the lungs clenched painfully at the absence of oxygen. The sound of the reader's heart retreated reluctantly from the shoreline of the reader's ears. As the reader rose up to a kneeling position, the reader's knees and elbows undulated, vibrated, as they began to experience adrenaline withdrawal. The reader was bathed in sweat, which poured in thin streams along the reader's spine, rib cage and throat. With one trembling forearm, the reader wiped at the perspiration now pooling around the reader's eyes.

It seemed like an eternity until the reader's breathing

subsided. It seemed still longer until the rubbery feeling departed from the reader's joints.



Suddenly, there was light in the darkness.

It was a rectangle of illumination, slightly below the reader's eye level, as if some kind of trapdoor had opened some yards away.

No, not a trapdoor. It was a light table. Or a video game, lit from within by a pale radiance that was almost golden, almost orange, almost red. The reader rose unsteadily to a standing posture. The tops of miniature marble columns were visible from the higher vantage point, but not much else.

squeak squeak squeak

The figure of Viktor Davis emerged from the darkness on the opposite side of the rectangle, stepping forward until he stood above the (table? game?). He gazed down into it for a period of several seconds, his features inscrutable.

He looked up at the reader and smiled, the underlighting lending his face a strange and malevolent aspect which even the pale blueness of his eyes could not completely belie.



"I was just kidding," he said. "*Cerebus* goes to issue three hundred. Just like I've always said. March 2004."

The reader and Viktor Davis regarded one another for several minutes, without speaking, across the strange, lighted rectangle. Calmly, Viktor Davis withdrew his pack of cigarettes from his hip pocket and selected one. Raising the lighter in his right hand, he lit the cigarette in a quick, easy motion.

"What's the matter?" he asked, still smiling through a dissipating cloud of smoke.

"Don't you trust me?"



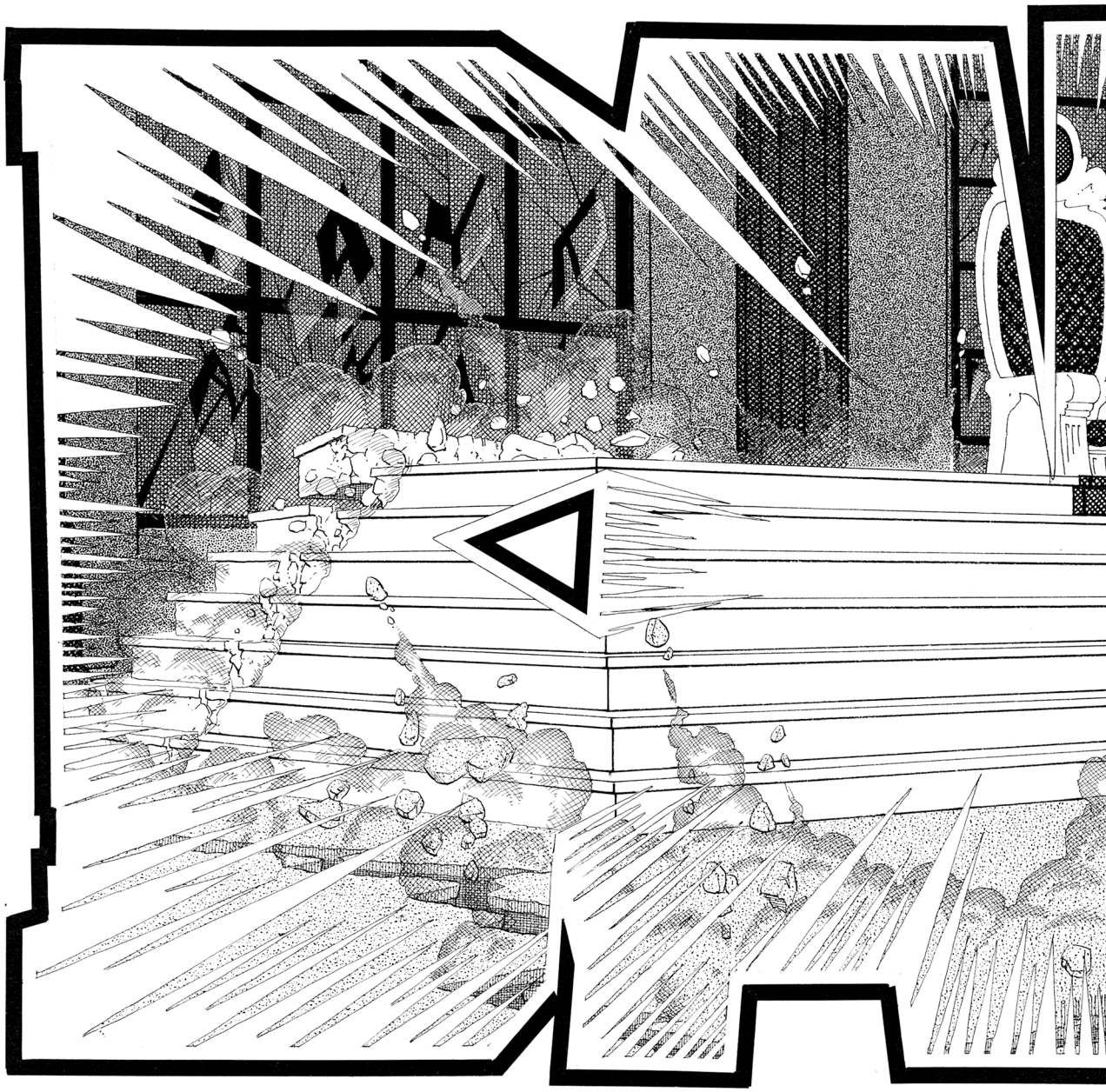
He bent forward slightly, stray locks of hair falling forward as he peered into the wan (now nearly colourless) illumination. He took a drag from his cigarette.

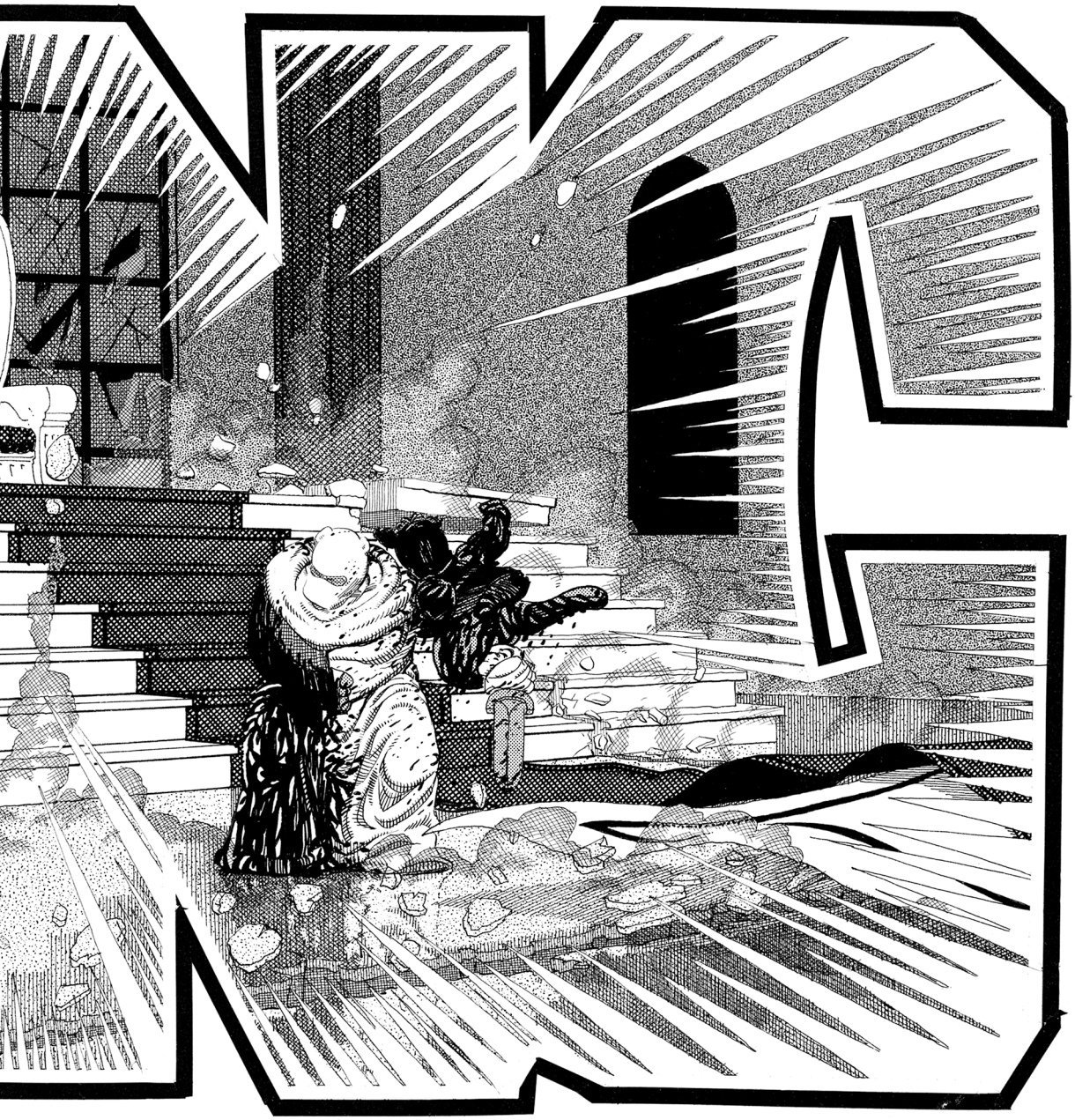
"Bang," said Viktor Davis, in the same conversational tone with which he had addressed the reader, a small burst of cigarette smoke serving as a kind of punctuation.

"Bang, bang, bang," he added.

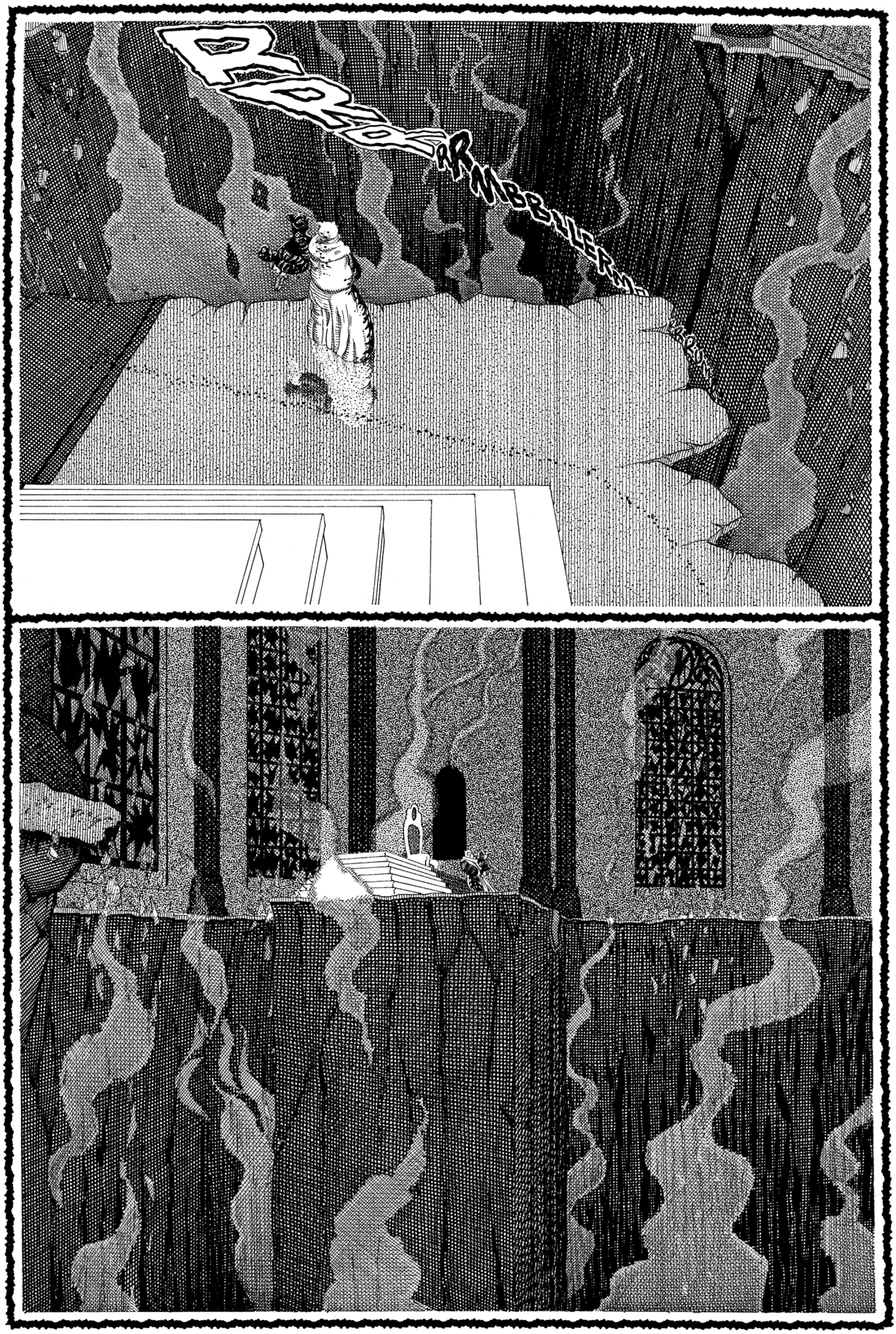
The light went out.

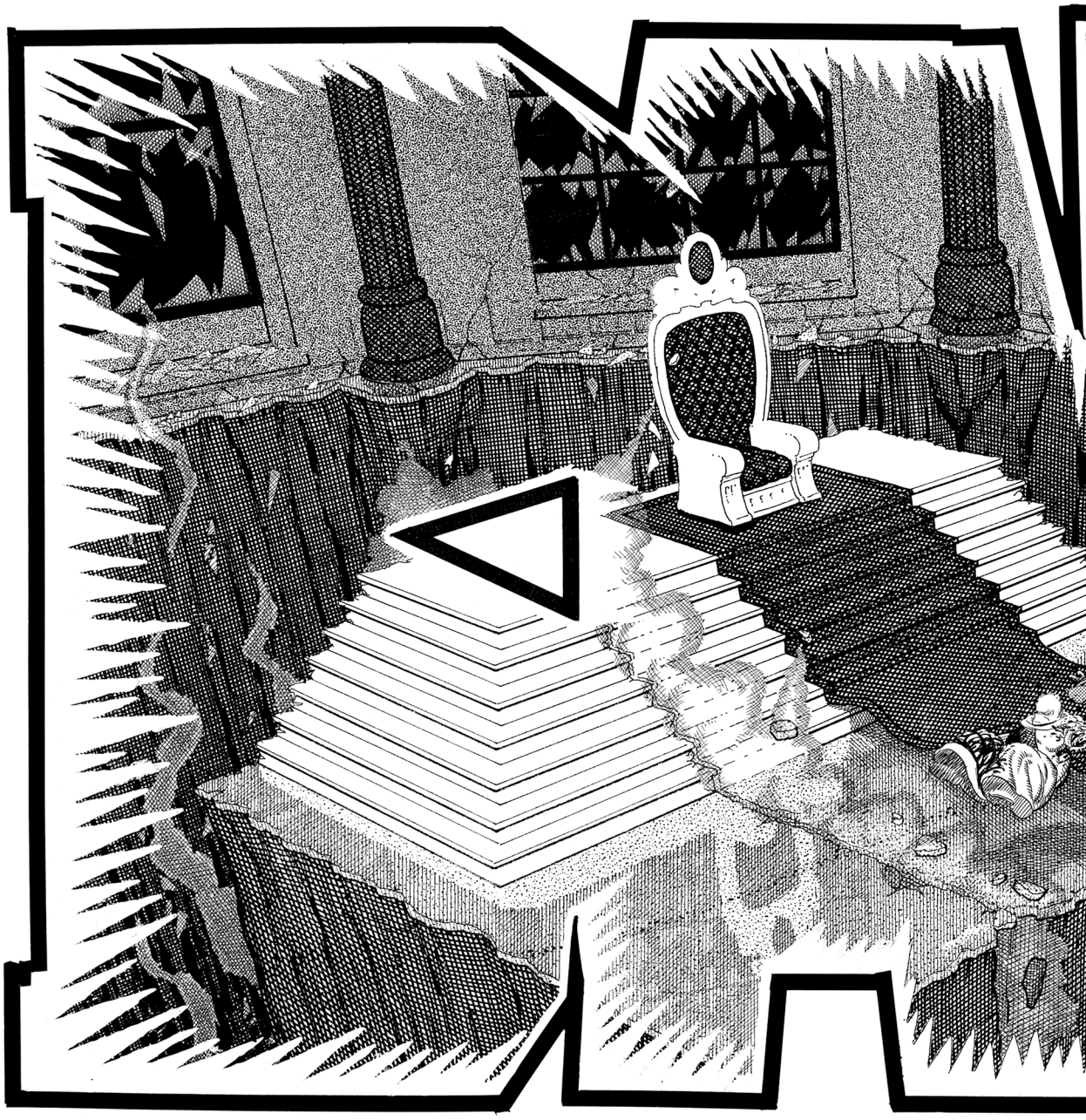

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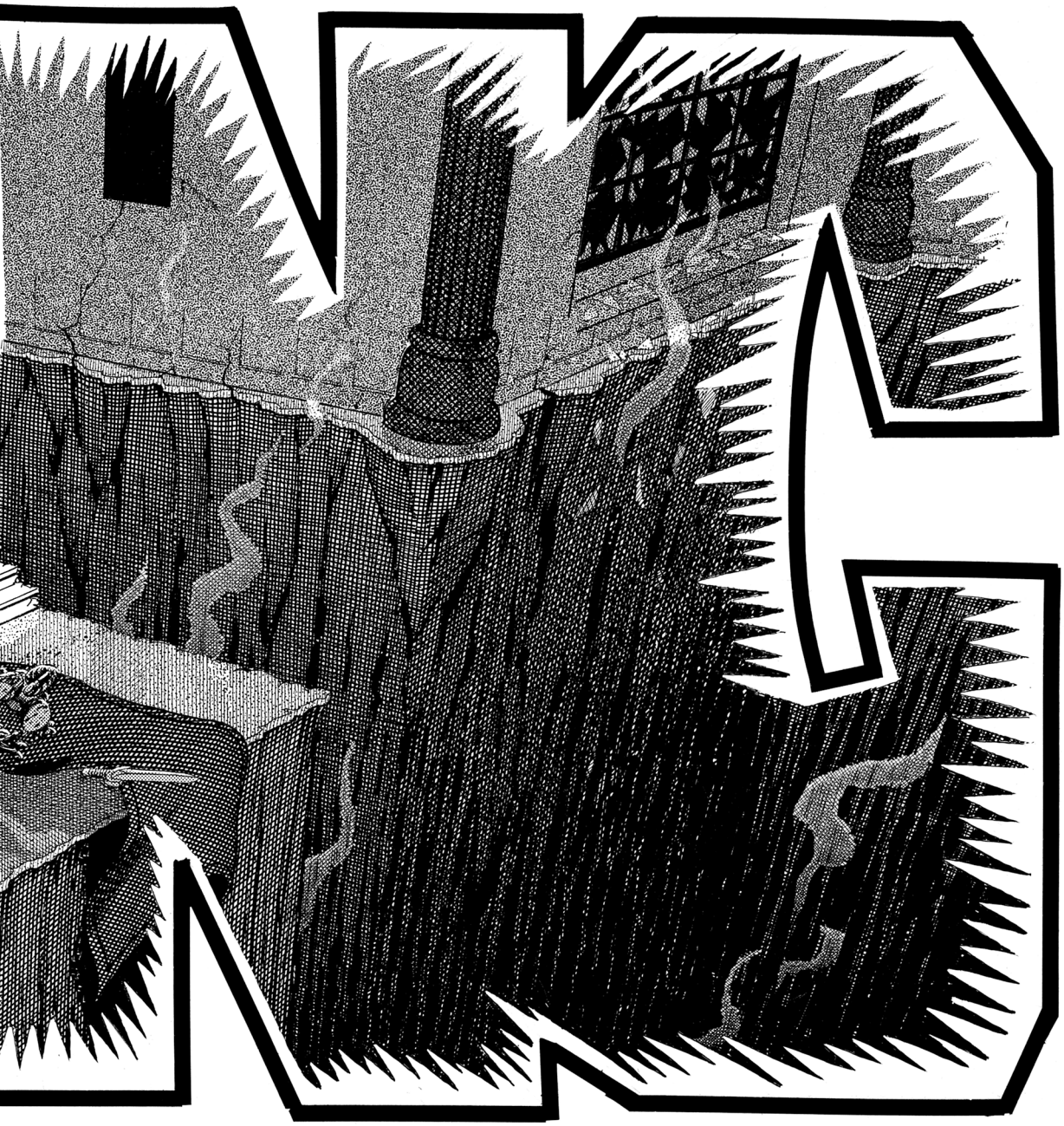


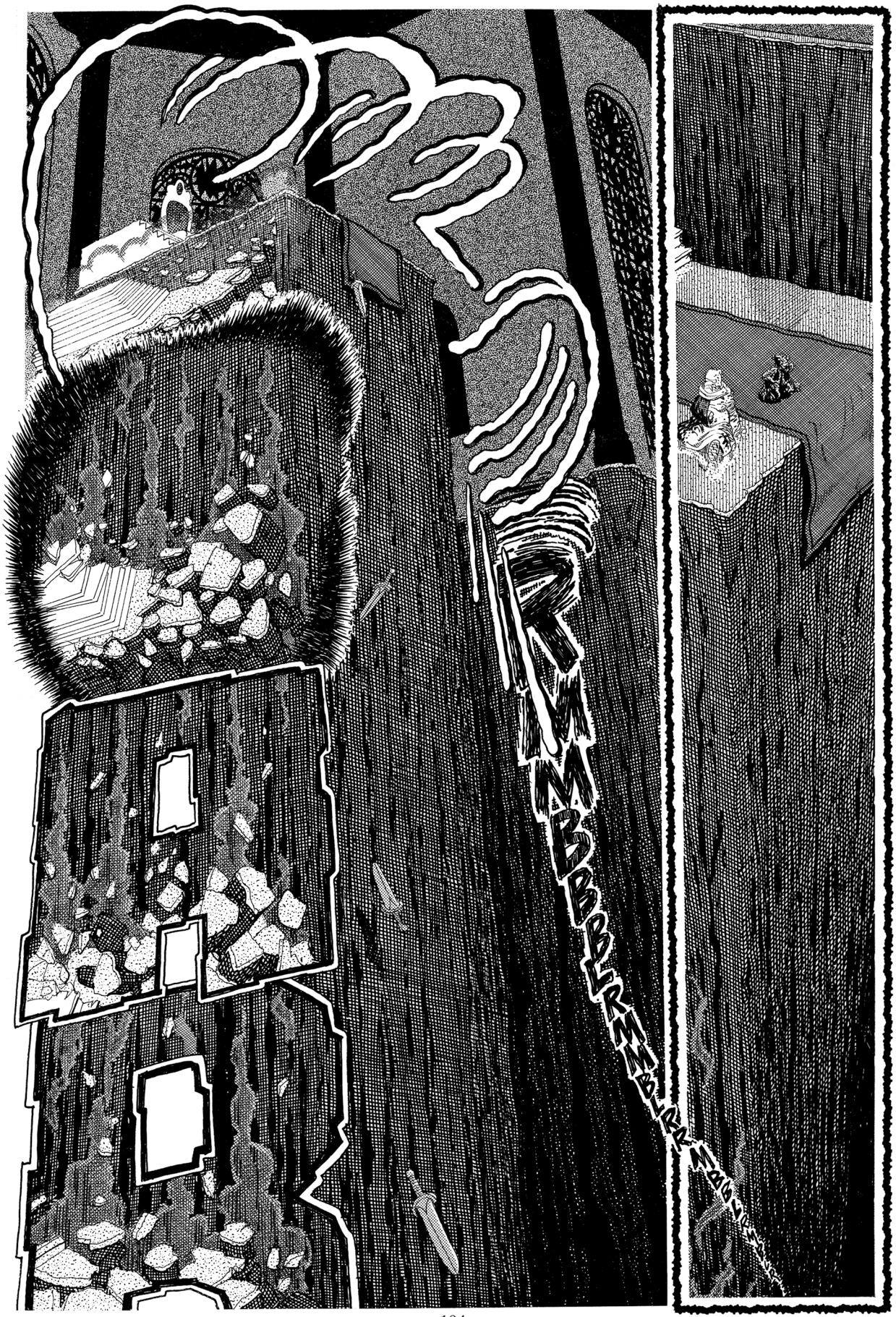


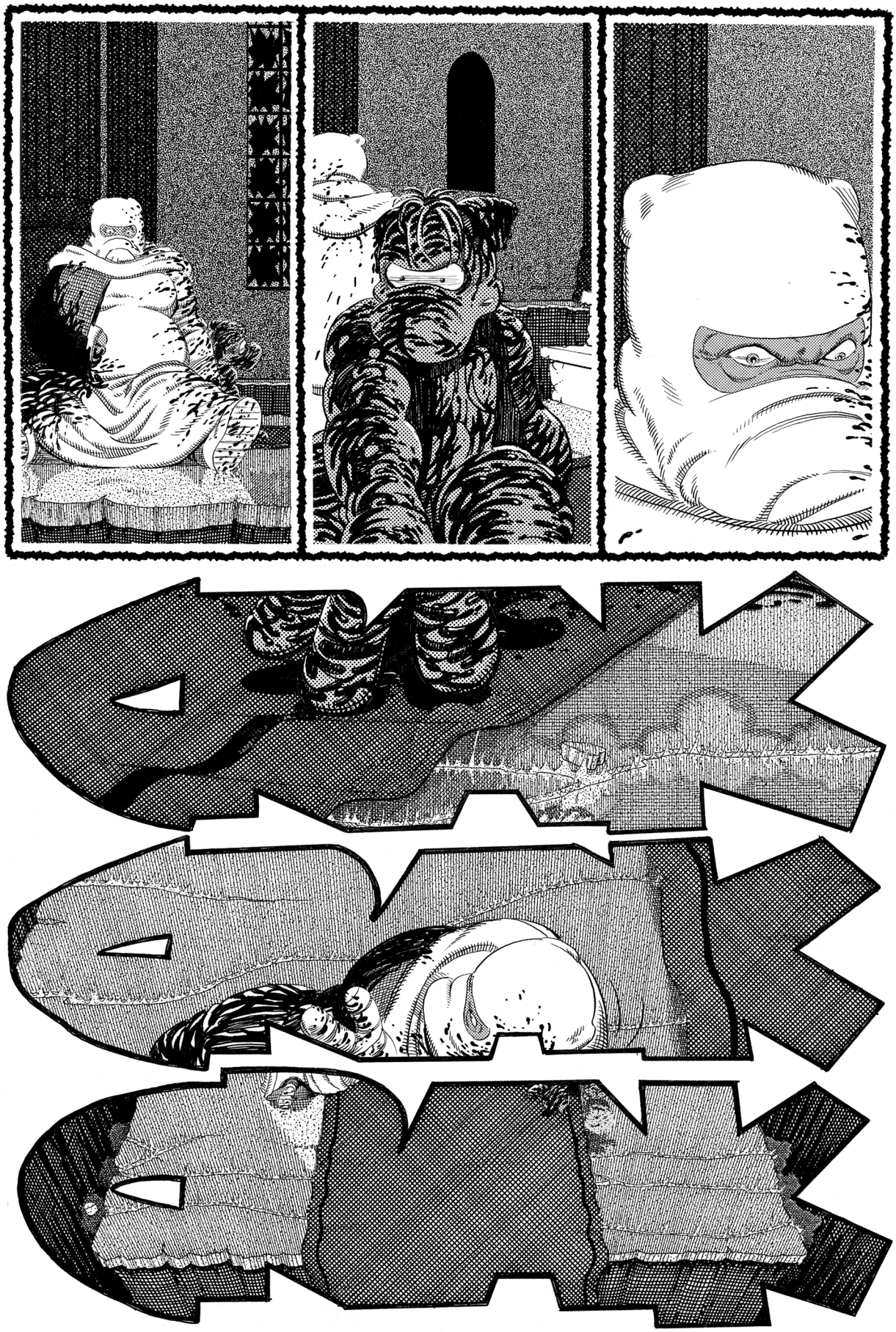
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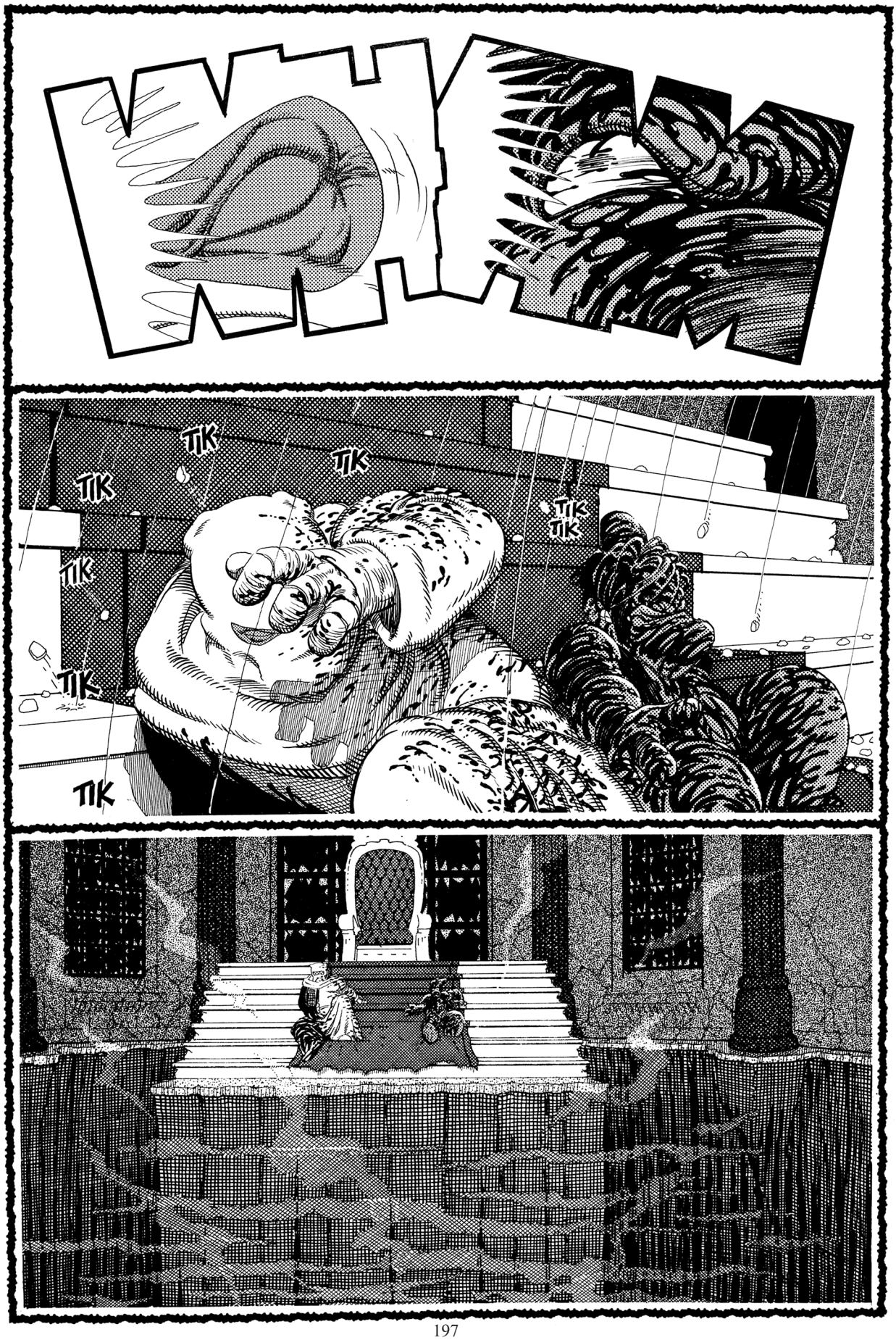

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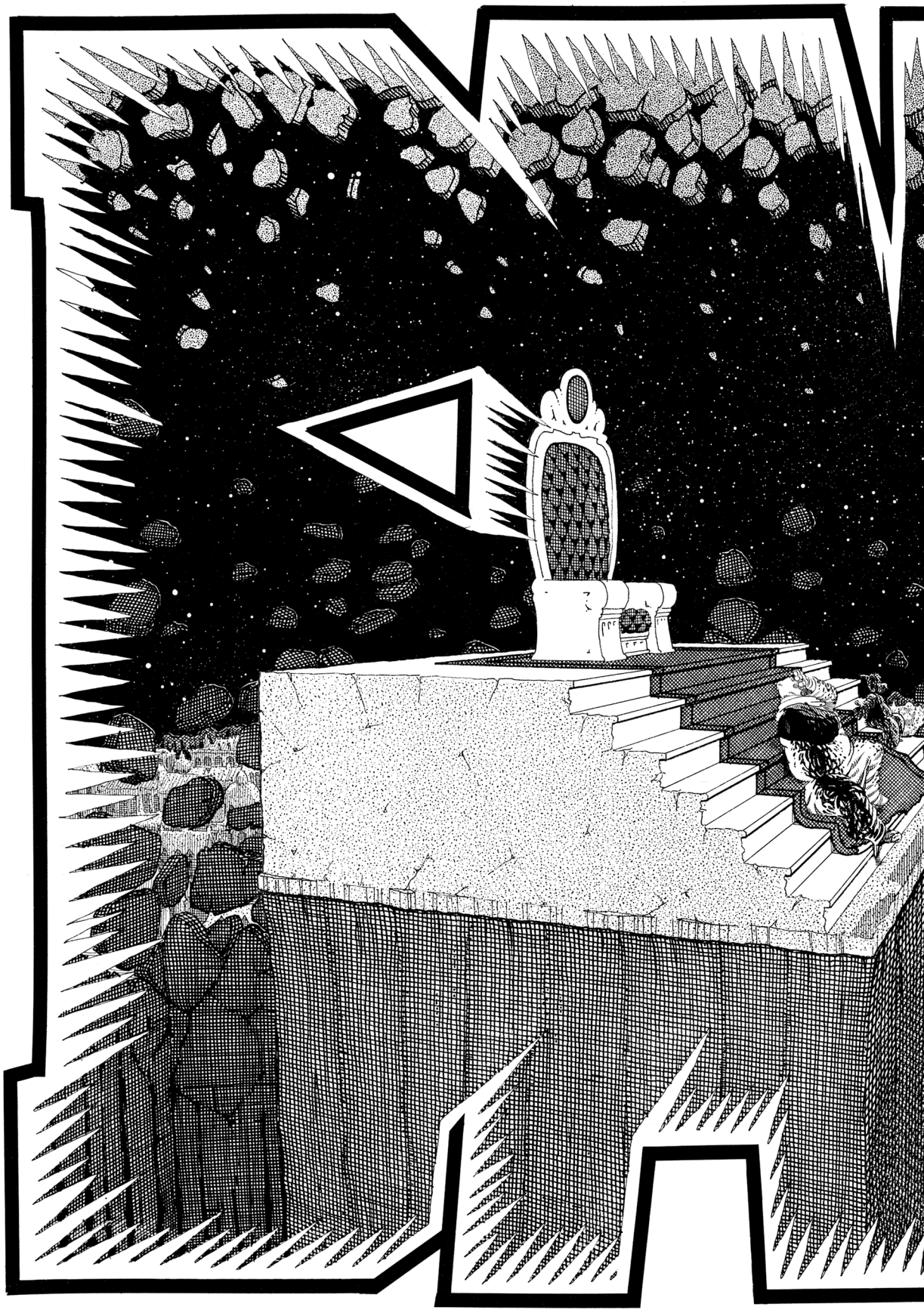


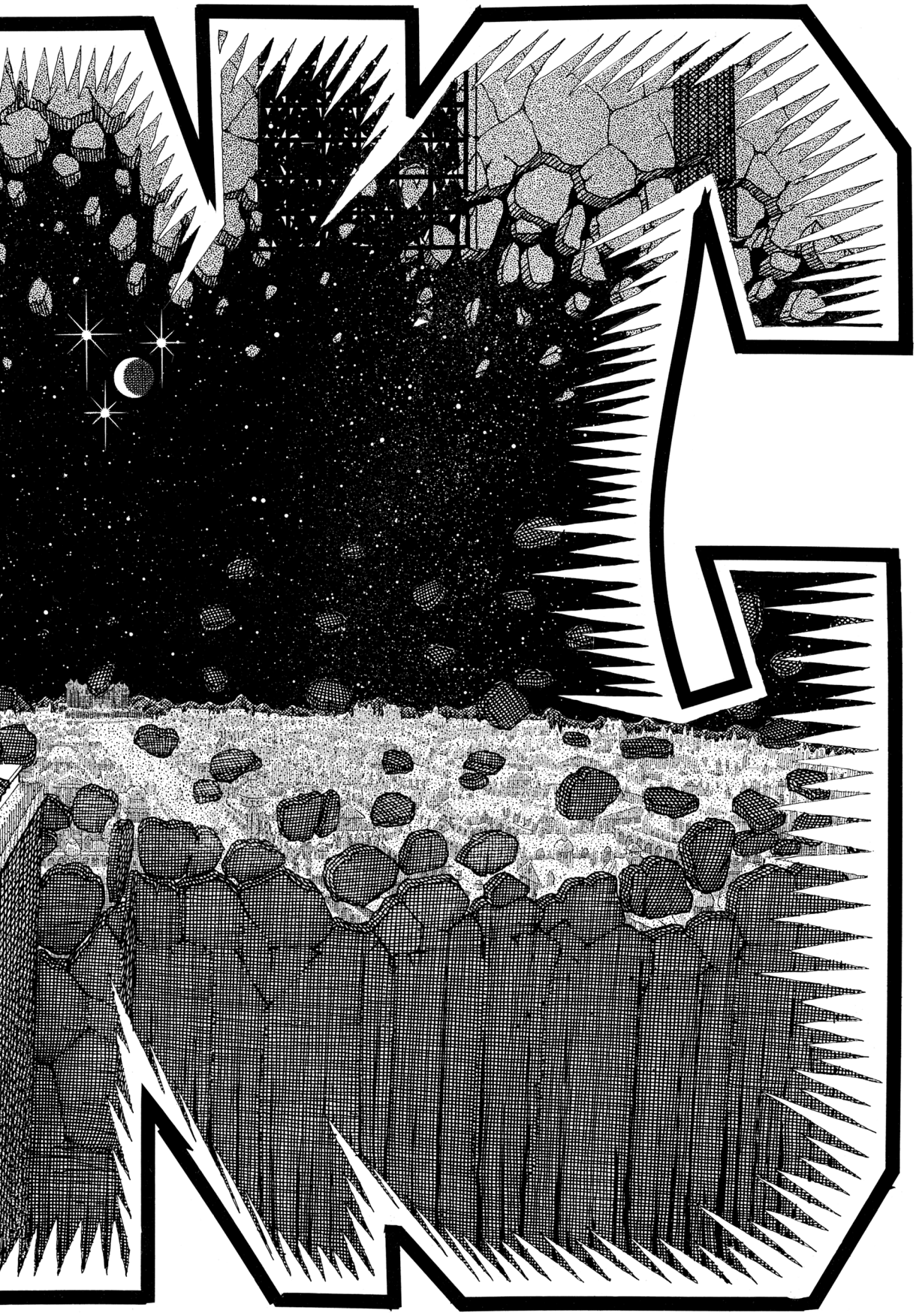



RMBBBRMBLRRMBLRRMBLR




TIK
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A hard, laminated rectangle was clutched in the reader's right hand. A haze of moisture, of perspiration, spilled outwards from fingers and thumb – blurring the gold display lettering set against a black field: VIKTOR DAVIS: ACCESS ALL AREAS, it declared. Inset, below the lettering, was a reproduction of the cover of Cerebus issue #181. Above the heads of the exultant, jostling, tightly packed crowd, over the passageways which emptied into the (stadium? arena?),

were colourful reproductions of Cerebus covers. In passing, the reader recognized the red and black montage of Carl Jung's paintings and the Artemis "tarot card" illustration. Black stenciled lettering beneath it read "ACCESS 174". The reader began to push forward in the direction of the familiar black and gold wallpaper pattern of issue 175. Nearby, someone with a pink spray can was embellishing lime-green balloon lettering which covered several square feet of cement wall space: ELROD LIVES. Above and to the right, in a yellow starburst, someone had spray-painted BONE RULES in magenta and navy blue script. Across the final three letters, another had added (in purple magic marker) CEREBUS GOVERNS. The reader narrowly avoided a collision with a stadium security guard, his cap turned at a jaunty angle, taking a long hard pull on a hash pipe imaginatively modified from the barrel and cylinder of a .38 caliber revolver.

As the reader approached the distinctive green rectangle of the issue #181 cover, a hand reached out, snaring the reader's left bicep. The hand, naturally enough, was attached to an arm, the arm to a shoulder. Above the shoulder was a face which bore an eerie resemblance to Frank Zappa, only heavier set, more solidly built.

"I *thought* I'd find you out here. You were supposed to go to the backstage entrance. I'm Ken Viola – I'm the one who did the *Masters of...*" His next words were drowned out as the familiar opening chords to *My Astoria* came booming through the public address system, prompting a noisy and enthusiastic reaction. The reader leaned closer, the reader's ear now mere inches from the Frank Zappa face. "...for the Grateful Dead and the Stones. *This* way!"

The reader fell in behind, as Ken Viola pushed his way (expertly) through the crowd in the direction of an unmarked doorway which was flanked by two burly guards wearing yellow VIKTOR DAVIS T-shirts. They each took a meaningful, menacing step towards the reader.

"They're with *me*," Viola shouted over his shoulder and the duo stepped back, recrossing their arms as they did so. The door opened fractionally and the reader slipped in behind. Viola joined a small group just inside the door as the reader's eyes adjusted to the indirect lighting of the large, comfortably furnished room. There was a party in progress.

"No. No humans," someone was saying as the reader moved forward. The reader recognized Steve Bissette from the *Rare Bit* preview. "There weren't any humans in the Upper Cretaceous period." He was addressing a young couple dressed entirely in leather, with purple, spiked hair and matching nose rings.

"How did the dinosaurs dress? That's what *I* want to know," asked someone next to him wearing a "Fiasco Comics: Feel the Desperation" T-shirt. "I mean did they wear bowling shirts or neckties or what?"

"Shut up, Don," laughed Bissette. The reader's attention was attracted to a tall, middle-aged gentleman asleep in a gray armchair, a paper Fiasco Comics hat pulled down over one eye.

"Rick Veitch," said a voice to the reader's left. The reader turned to see Viktor Davis gesturing with a green Heineken bottle towards the somnambulant figure.

"He's working on his next issue." This was greeted with a burst of laughter from the party-goers in the immediate vicinity. Viktor Davis tucked his cigarette into the corner of his mouth and extended his right hand, gripping the reader's own, tightly and enthusiastically. "Glad you could make it," he said. From nowhere, a young man with curly hair appeared, his face flushed and his eyes glittering. His white dress shirt was unbuttoned to the waist and smeared with lipstick. "Well, Martin?" asked Viktor.

"She kept yelling, *DO me, Gunther! DO me, Gunther.*" Viktor exploded with laughter. He set the beer bottle down on a nearby table and ground out his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. He picked up a jacket made of some iridescent green material from the back of a chair. He shrugged into it. Ken Viola appeared from Viktor's left, stepping in front of him. Viktor did up the middle button. "Looks better unbuttoned," said Viola. Viktor contemplated the button for a moment and undid it. "Ready when you are," he said.

"Let's do it," Viola replied.

Viktor turned to the reader. "Come on."

"Give 'em hell," someone shouted as they pushed through a door marked Fire Exit. The closing door extinguished the sound of the party. They were in a brightly-lit, cinder block hallway, walking quickly in single file; Viola in the lead, Viktor behind him. They approached a heavy, dark curtain which Viola pulled

aside. “Rude, rude, rude,” he said, grinning at Viktor and the reader. From somewhere a deep bass vibration tickled the bottom of the reader’s feet.

“I wish I were nude,” said Viktor. He and Viola high-fived each other.



“You, too,” said Viola, gesturing into the darkness beyond the curtain. He gently pushed the reader through. “Go. Go – you have to keep up.”



Up ahead, the reader could see Viktor Davis ascending a narrow cement staircase flanked by heavy iron railings. The reader followed as the resonant bass resolved itself into a familiar song.

We’d like to thank you once again.

The reader’s heart did a backflip. It was the reprise to “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”. This is impossible, thought the reader. I must be dreaming.

Sergeant Pepper’s one and only Lonely Hearts Club Band.

Viktor Davis grinned back at the reader from the halfway point on the stairs, silhouetted against the bright rectangle of a doorway looming above him.

“If Rick Veitch ever wakes up, we’re all in trouble,” he shouted.

It’s getting very near the end.

The reader felt buoyant, elated. The reader’s legs endeavoured to move more quickly, to close the gap between reader and author. Viktor Davis was now almost to the top of the stairs. The air was resistant, holding the reader back.

Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely
Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely
Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely

The roar of the crowd wrestled with the music, the two rising in tandem to a nearly unimaginable crescendo. Viktor Davis had reached the top of the stairs.

Heaaaaarts...

Almost there, thought the reader. I’m almost there.

Cluuuubbb...

Viktor Davis disappeared from view, into the rectangle of light which was now a deep vermillion.

Baaaaandd!

The reader ascended the last few steps even as the roar of the crowd began to fade (just like on the record, thought the reader) and the music with it. The rectangle of light (as the reader reached it) darkened from vermillion to an ugly brown and was replaced by a diffuse blue-white. The reader passed through into the arena.



It was the largest stadium the reader had ever seen: five different levels which stretched away to the horizon on either side and which seemed to ascend to the very heavens themselves. The echo of the reader’s footsteps reflected back to the reader’s ears (after a delay of two or three seconds). Ahead of the reader stood Viktor Davis, leaning on a railing, lighting a cigarette. Wavering yellow light illuminated a large “No Smoking” sign.

The stadium was empty.



The reader approached Viktor Davis slowly. The air was still and the smoke from his cigarette rose in an impossibly thin blue-gray stream into the sky, where it vanished from sight. The green jacket was gone, replaced by a well-worn black T-shirt. As the reader approached, white lettering became visible.

Bratpack, it said.

As the reader reached a point adjacent to the author, smaller lettering was visible.

Live fast. Love hard.

And beneath that: *Die with your mask on.*

To the right of the motto something had been covered over with red paint. To the left of the motto was the stylised skull of the King Hell Press logo.

The reader joined Viktor Davis. The railing was covered in a fine layer of frost which retreated from the reader’s palms.

It was cold.

Everything was very cold.



“Comic books are not like rock ‘n’ roll,” said Viktor Davis. “What would I do when I got to the stage? Eat

my bran muffin and open my morning mail?" He took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette. "You'd be surprised at the number of cartoonists who keep waiting for it to turn *into* rock 'n' roll. I remember all the long faces back in 1990, or whenever it was that the Turtles movie came out. They might as well have had big thought balloons over their heads: 'Shit! It wasn't me! The first millionaire, the best-selling toy line, the hit movie! It was supposed to be ME, dammit! ME! ME! ME!'"



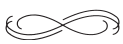
I can never understand what people like that are doing in the comic-book field. Okay – that's a bit disingenuous – I *do* understand. They're like would-be starlets who hang around in drugstores in Hollywood, waiting to be "discovered". A friend of mine who used to own a nightclub up in Kingston was talking to me about the Turtles one time; he had been on a plane going somewhere and was sitting next to the woman who "put on all of their stadium shows" (you know, that *Pizza Hut* thing?). So he's telling her how his kids are MAJOR Turtles fans and she takes his name and address and says she'll send him an autograph, which arrived a little while later. "Oh, yeah?" I asked – "which one; Kevin or Peter?" "Donatello," he says. "Who the hell are Kevin and Peter?"

I love that story.



I remember seeing Vaughn Bodé in Toronto at the 1974 Cosmicon...1975, maybe. It was at the time that he was doing his "Cartoon Concerts". He had the Robert Plant hair. He had a skintight velour top with a big gold star on the chest. Skintight pants. An absolute *cloud* of perfume around him. His fingernails all came to a point, perfectly manicured. I went up and asked him if I could do an interview with him (I was one of those fans; I did the interviews in *Comic Art News & Reviews* – most of them at big Toronto cons). "Maybe later," he said. Then he just sort of wandered around the dealers' room. Not looking at anything. Not talking to anyone. Just, you know, being THE Vaughn Bodé.

The "Cartoon Concert" was basically a slide show: each slide a different panel. Bodé was off to one side with a microphone, acting out all of the parts. He did Cheech Wizard with W.C. Fields' voice. That ruined it for me. To me, Cheech Wizard had the voice of that guy in the *Dead End Kids* (Huntz Hall or Leo Gorcey, I can never remember which one is which: the wiseass one who mispronounced everything). I stopped reading *Cheech Wizard* shortly after that.



Comic books are not a communal activity. I get a lot of mail from people who read *Cerebus* and haven't the slightest interest in going to a Viktor Davis store signing or a convention where Viktor Davis is a featured guest. They go to their local store, they pick up their *Cerebus* and then they split. That's one of the more interesting things about comic books. If you add up all the people who go to signings and conventions, it probably amounts to a very small fraction of the total readership. When I visited Eddie Campbell in Australia, he had something on the order of a hundred unpublished pages of *From Hell* in photocopy form. The second day at his place, I scooped them up, went out back and started reading. I finished about forty pages and Eddie came out and started talking to me. Don't you hate that? I mean, don't you just *hate* that? When you're trying to read a really good comic book and someone is trying to talk to you at the same time? "F'cryin' out loud, Eddie, I'm reading *From Hell* here!"

That's why comic books are not like rock 'n' roll.

For fuck's sake, Mick, will you shut up? I'm trying to listen to *Dirty Work!*



Much closer together now. Just like I said.

You're reading *Cerebus* and I'm talking to you. I'm talking to you and you're reading *Cerebus*.

Maybe you lit up a joint when you started and it's "kicking in". There are pages left to go. You can feel them in your right hand. Maybe you have a glass of wine or a bag of your favourite cookies.

They (*whoever they are*) won't be coming over for another half-hour.

That television show (*whatever it is*) isn't on yet.

You just started your lunch hour.

You just put the kids to bed.

There's another twenty minutes until the (*bus, train, subway*) reaches your stop.

It's just me and you. You and me.

You, me.

And the story.



The reader was suddenly aware that the stadium was growing insubstantial. The railing was gone. The reader was sitting down (when did that happen?). Viktor

Davis' voice was gone as well. Again, all was darkness, but this time the feeling was not unsettling. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, just being here. Being here in the *Cerebus* story.



"We're going back now," said Viktor Davis, from somewhere nearby. "We're going back to the end of *Church & State*. The part about Terim and Tarim. Remember? The void and that tiny point of light? The light that might have been an inch across or a million miles across."

Viktor Davis heaved a sigh. It sounded as if the weight of fifteen years were being lifted from his shoulders.

"I never thought I'd get here," he said. And then he laughed. The sound was not unpleasant, this time.



"There she is," he said. The reader's eyes darted from side to side. "No, no, right there," he said. "You're looking right at her." The reader saw nothing but darkness. "Exactly," said Viktor Davis.



The Void.

The Big Empty.

Consider the void. Not the void. The Void. She's aware. Oh, yes, just as I said. One Single Void Consciousness. Consider the known universe. Not the Known Universe. The known universe. Picture it as a tree, a redwood: bursting upward and outward, a slow-motion explosion that has taken hundreds and hundreds of years to reach fruition. Picture yourself as a microbe at the base of that tree, staring up at it. Pretty impressive, isn't it? How long would a microbe have to climb to reach the first branch? How long would a microbe have to climb that redwood to reach the topmost branch: the topmost leaf on the topmost branch? If microbes had lips, you'd probably emit a long, slow whistle at this point.

The Known Universe, you'd say to yourself, feeling Truly Humbled and Strangely Microbianly God-like in your new awareness.

The Void laughs. The Void thinks that's pretty funny.



Through the miracle of *Cerebus* Technology, suddenly, little microbe, You Are There. The topmost branch of the tallest redwood, climbing slowly to the topmost leaf on that topmost branch.

You've brought a little flag with you, which you plant in the topmost vein of the topmost leaf. You carefully take out your little microbe camera and take a few pictures. You take some readings on your little microbe gizmo. You switch on the microphone of your little microbe communicator. Far below you, immense crowds of microbes surge around a loudspeaker. You clear your microbe throat and prepare for The Most Significant Broadcast in Microbe History.

"I'm speaking to you," you intone, emotion welling within your microbe breast, "*from the End of the Known Universe."*

The crowd goes wild.



The farthest star.

No, not the *Farthest star that you can see through the Hubble Space Telescope* – that's not even up to the first knothole on the redwood, which is a good fifty feet or so below the first branch.

The Farthest Star. Way, way, way, way, WAY out there.

And there you are. Circling a medium-sized star in your little Luke Skywalker orbiter. To one side of you, there's a field of stars, *stretching out into infinity* (once a microbe, always a microbe). All Right. All right. *Stretching out a long, long way.*

To the other side? Blackness. Nothing but blackness.

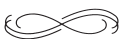
Her.



"My voice is coming to you over a small intercom inset in your Luke Skywalker orbiter. You'll notice the little *Lucasfilm*™ label on everything. You can't be too careful, you know. We're now backing away from the medium-sized star, picking up speed." Through the forward screen, the reader could see the known universe beginning to retreat. "Now we're headed for the first branch – just like when you were a microbe. One big jump." Suddenly, the shape of the known universe was visible, a vast irregular globe of dust particles, stars, swirling galaxies, rushing in towards one another. "*Cerebus* Technology – hyperspace – whatever you want to call it. The net effect is that we're going back through time, outracing the light that's coming from all of those galaxies. Another big jump." Now the mass condensed even further, a series of swollen clouds of light assembled about a point of convergence, locked in slow orbit. "Another big jump." The swollen clouds

coalesced into globes of light, turned different colours; diminished in size. At their center, a giant red globe formed, tendrils of energy draining into it from the satellite globes, which began to shrink, vanishing, one at a time. "Another big jump." Now the satellite globes had shrunk to almost nothing. The central sphere as well had diminished in size, its colour changing from red to blue to yellow to white. "Another big jump." Now there was no trace of the satellite globes whatsoever, just an immaculate single white point of light. The point of light vanished. "Another big jump." All was blackness. "Another bigger jump." All was blackness. "Five more big jumps in one." All was blackness.

"And here we are," said Viktor Davis. "The blank page."



A small white globe appeared from nowhere. The reader blinked.

"Creation," said Viktor Davis. "Appearance," he added.

"Are the two terms redundant?"

The reader thought for a moment.

"That's a rhetorical question."

It's the central issue, the Bone (if Jeff Smith will forgive me) of Contention. Tons and tons of coal, pressing down on a single spot for thousands of years, will produce a diamond. As far as She's concerned, that's it. Case Closed. Debate over. "I made it. It's mine."

The reader was hypnotised by the...strange, glowing... white...

"Uh-huh," said Viktor Davis. "The Big Round Glowing White Strange Thing. What you call the known universe is still there, but we're so far away that it would take trillions and trillions and...you get the idea...of years for the light to get out here. If you want a closer look, you just hit the button in front of you."

The reader wanted a closer look. The reader definitely wanted a closer look.



It was... "Indescribable?" asked Viktor Davis. Yes. Yes. Indescribable. Magnificent. Awe-inspiring...it was...it was...

"Sublime, was the word that they used to use. The dictionary definition doesn't do it justice: *lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression or manner; of outstanding spiritual, intellectual or moral worth; tending to inspire awe, usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, or grandeur) or transcendent excellence; high in place, lofty of mien.* My dictionary follows this with *HAUGHTY*, in caps naturally. Some insignificant troll of an academic just HAD to add that one. Sticks out like a wet seven-letter fart at a formal banquet. Does he look *haughty* to you?"

No, the reader thought. No – to describe it...him...as "haughty" was an insult. A grave insult.

"The first white men to see Niagara Falls used the word. Can you imagine hacking your way through the wilderness, that thunderous roar just getting louder and louder and Louder and LOUDER? It's an age before loudspeakers, before amplified sound of any kind. It would seem like thunder, but constant, immutable. You burst through the last of the dense woods and scrub and bushes, and there you are, standing atop sheer cliffs which drop precipitously into a wide gorge. And there...It...is. A wide curtain of white water, deafeningly loud. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of gallons of water, hurtling towards the precipice at forty miles per hour, plunging one hundred and seventy feet, the impact obscured by a dense, impenetrable white mist, every second. Every. Second.

"You were terrified. You were awestricken. It was as if you were looking at God Himself. And when you returned to Quebec City or Albany? No photographs. No cassette recorders. No video cameras."

"It's big," you say. "It's huge. It's loud. It's...it's..."



The reader was only half listening. It...he...was Light. Flames, but not wavering or irregular. Electricity, sheet lightning, the Aurora Borealis. The reader thought of classical ballet. It... he...bore the same relationship to the sun, was similar, in the way that a bad caricature resembled the face upon which it was modeled. Patterns. Amazing, complex, interwoven patterns swam across, within the globe shape. Now – now, just then, like a cell dividing. Two shapes, then four, then eight. But, unlike the "four people changing places in a phone booth" quality of cell division, it was a dance, immaculate synchronised swimming, fluid legerdemain. Now, now – just then – like a kaleidoscope of interwoven faces, joy multiplying, replicating, then consolidating into a single face which...the reader laughed and the clownish face was gone. Arcs of light stretched across to one another, clasping like perfect hands rendered by an otherworldly Leonardo, dissolving into...

Viktor Davis was still talking, still...nattering. The

reader felt a sense of irritation. "Be quiet," the reader wanted to say. "*I'm Looking. I'm LOOKING!* You're spoiling it. Just let me...look."

"Compelling," Viktor Davis said. "Although the comparison with Niagara Falls is woefully inadequate, he shares many of the same traits. It is one of those inescapable facts of nature that an entity contemplating the sublime is going to feel an irresistible urge to form a connection with it of some kind. Put another way, what do you *do* with Niagara Falls? I mean, it's magnificent, okay. It's a marvel, sure. It's virtually without compare, a natural wonder, granted. But – but – it's just SITTING THERE! I have to be...*with* it. I have to...*attach* it to me...or...or...

"String a rope across it and do a tightrope act. Fly over it in an airplane. Go over it in a barrel. Build a hotel next to it. Or an amusement park. Or sell tickets on a boat that goes right up to it.

"*Harness* it."

The reader felt the reader's mind begin to split.

Exception.

Consensus.



The reader *knew* this story. (Huh?) Even as Viktor Davis' words struck the reader's ear, buzzing, insistent, annoying, like a large, lazy housefly, the reader felt a sinking feeling in the pit of the reader's stomach. (*Sinking feeling? What sinking feeling?*) It...he...was still right there. (*Yeah, yeah. What about it?*) Just as... magnificent. Just as...awe-inspiring, but Viktor Davis' words had changed something. (*They had?*) Foreboding. (*Confusion.*) The reader felt a sense of foreboding and then...denial. (*Denial?*)

The reader would not...could not...face the implications. No. It didn't happen that way. (*What? What didn't happen?*) It couldn't happen that way. Nevermind. He's right. Don't Read This. But I can't stop. I can't... help myself. Just look. Don't listen anymore. Just look. Don't think about it. (*Don't think about WHAT? What are you talking about?*) If you think about it, it will happen and it...couldn't mustn't...happen. The reader began to shudder uncontrollably. (*What the hell is wrong with you?*) Any second now Viktor Davis was going to start talking again. Viktor Davis was going to...say things. Things that weren't true.

All stories are true.

"Shut up. Shut up!" the reader screamed. It had been said with Viktor Davis' voice and simultaneously given voice to in the reader's own mind (*the reader's own mind*). And an image. An image of the known universe, the satellite globes surrounding that...swollen... red...giant red...like...(WHAT?)...like...(WHAT? LIKE WHAT?!)

NO!

The reader's eyes closed; the reader's eyes closed to shut out that terrible picture, to wipe away that hideous picture of...of what the reader didn't want to think about.

Of course, closed eyes only made it worse. *That* image was in the reader's mind. Closed eyes only made the hideous picture more real. The reader's eyes snapped open and it...he...was there again. Even more perfect (it seemed to the reader) than before. Even more magnificent (it seemed) than before.

There was a...new quality to it. (*There was?*) So easy... so easy to overlook. All that...energy. Awe-inspiring. Dwarfing the reader. Filling the reader with unfelt emotions. Exalted emotions. But now...now the reader could see. Now the reader couldn't help but see. (*Well, you'd better tell me, because I don't see anything that's...*)

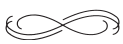
It...

He.

Was vulnerable. (*Vulnerable*?)



"Once we entered our...*modern*...age," said Viktor Davis quietly, "our age of technological marvels, a number of plans were put forward as to what to... *do*...with Niagara Falls. All of this stuff about Niagara Falls, by the way, I got from an amazing book called *Niagara* by Pierre Berton. Credit where it's due and all that. The plan I found the most interesting was Metropolis, a planned super-city. Gleaming towers up to the sky, very similar to the Fritz Lang movie of the same name. It would house most of the population of North America in a single structure. It would be built overtop of Niagara Falls. Not next to the Falls, you understand. Overtop of the Falls. The city would be powered by the Falls, which would be confined to the basement – the furnace room, if you will. The furnace room, of course, would be off limits to the general public. I have no doubt that they had some plan for soundproofing as well, lest that annoying roar disturb the good citizens of Metropolis."



The reader slumped forward.

The reader would have given anything, just seconds before, if Viktor Davis would have just stopped...talking. Anything. Now the reader found that the silence was not an improvement. Not by a long shot. The silence, in many ways, just sitting, sitting and staring at...him...was worse. Rage, mixed with loathing, welled up within the reader. It felt as if some vital part of the reader wanted to tear itself out of the reader's body and go to...him, to form some kind of a living shield.

"DAMN YOU!" screamed the reader.

"DAMN YOU! WHY CAN'T YOU JUST LEAVE HIM... *ALONE?"*

The reader wanted to
(hide him)

The reader wanted to
(put up a barricade around him)

The reader wanted to...

The rage subsided. It was replaced by an awful, overwhelming sense of futility. Impotence. Hide him. Put up a barricade around him.

"It really amounts to the same thing, doesn't it?" asked Viktor Davis, quietly, sympathetically.

The reader stared straight ahead at it...him.

Several long moments passed.

The reader nodded.



More time passed.

"You okay?" asked Viktor Davis.

Well, no. I don't understand what all this...

"I wasn't talking to you," snapped the author.

The reader bristled at this, considered a number of appropriate rejoinders about having followed Cerebus *for this long and what right did Viktor Davis have to...The reader thought about a sack of gold and a handful of silver coins. This was the thing the reader hated about* Cerebus. *Grudgingly, sulkily, the reader stayed quiet.*



The reader and Viktor Davis were, again, side by side in the vast, empty stadium. It was even colder now. It felt as if it might snow any minute.

"Define *okay*," said the reader.

Victor Davis smiled, briefly.

"There're only two more parts to go," he said.

"Do you really think it's true..." began the reader and then turned away sharply, visibly annoyed. "All right, all right. I know your answer.

"But...why?" the reader asked.

"Because I think it's time," said Viktor Davis. "Besides, I'm a storyteller. I think it's an effective story. I think it...explains a lot."

The reader thought about this for a time. And then nodded, glumly.

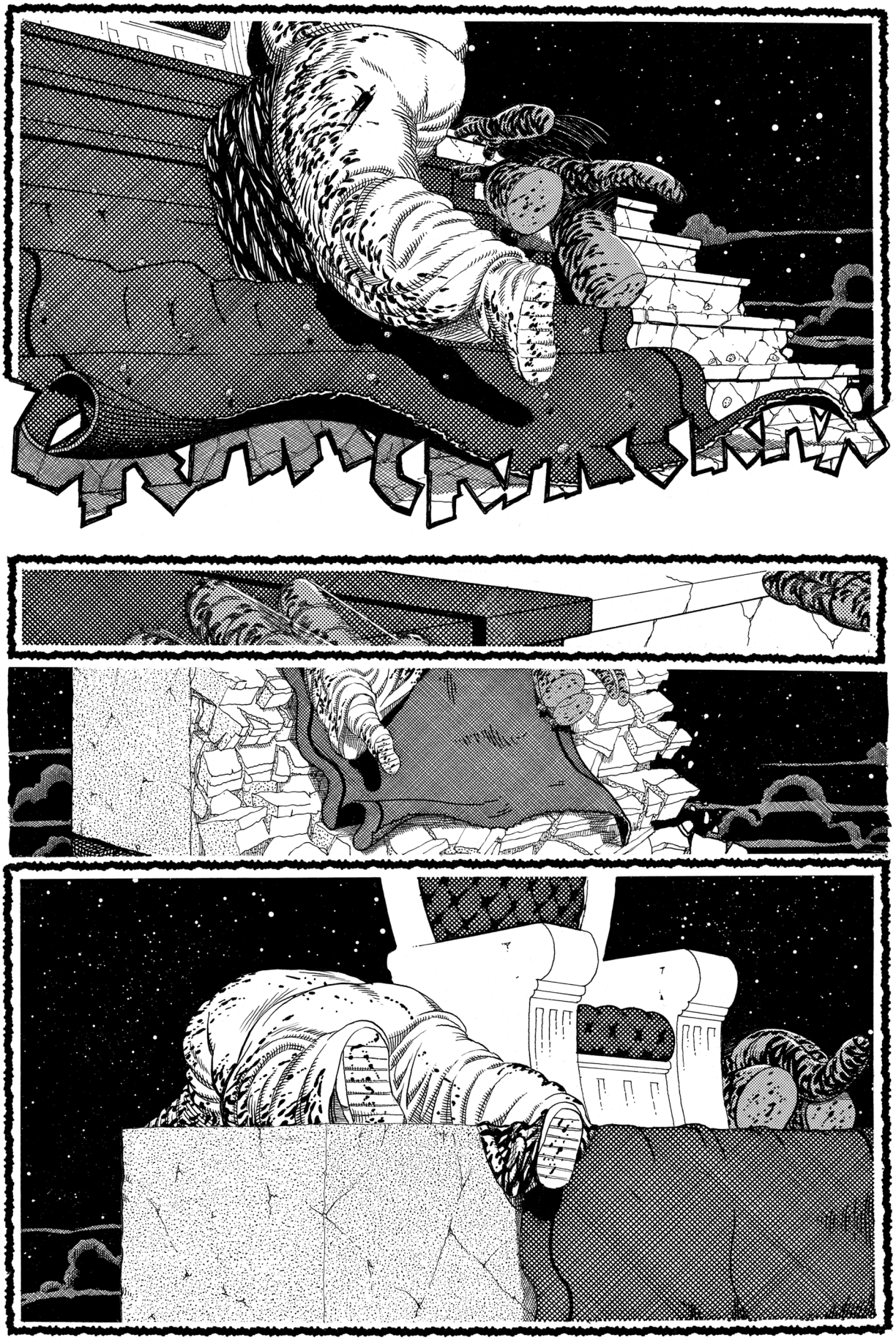
"Can I have one of your cigarettes?"

"Only if you already smoke," said Viktor Davis.

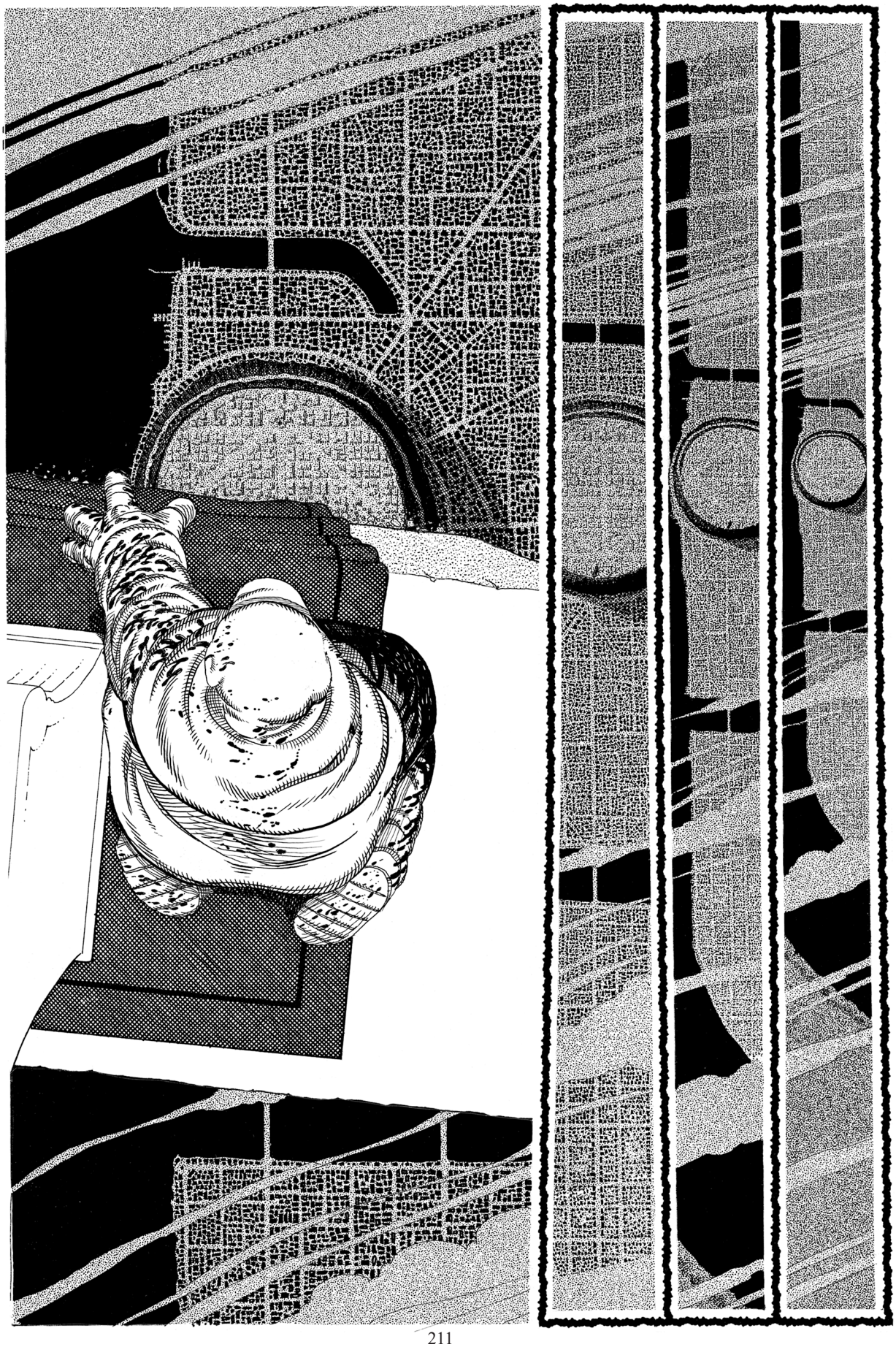
Large, wet snowflakes began falling all around them.



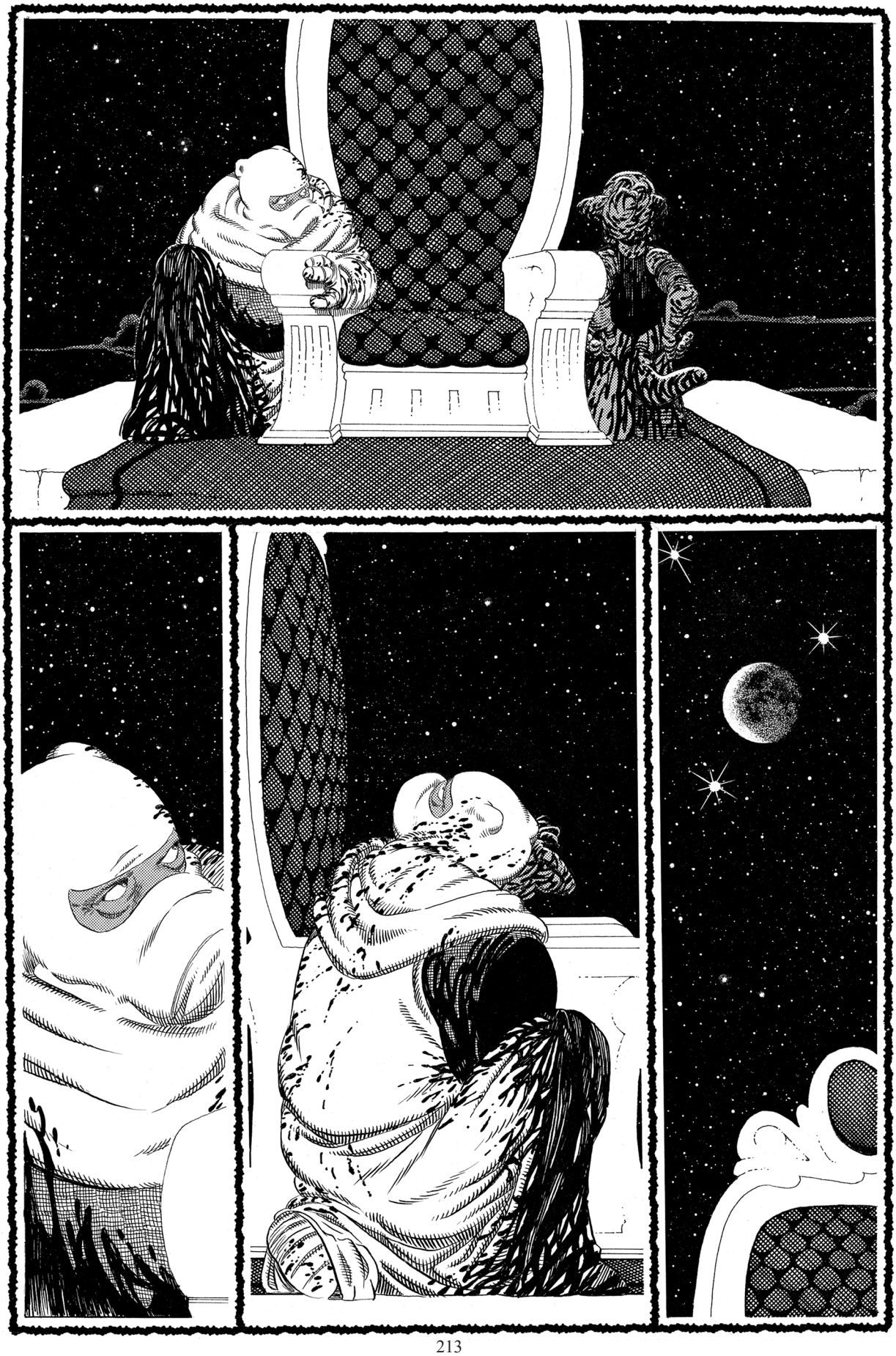

BATMAN
KNIGHTFALL

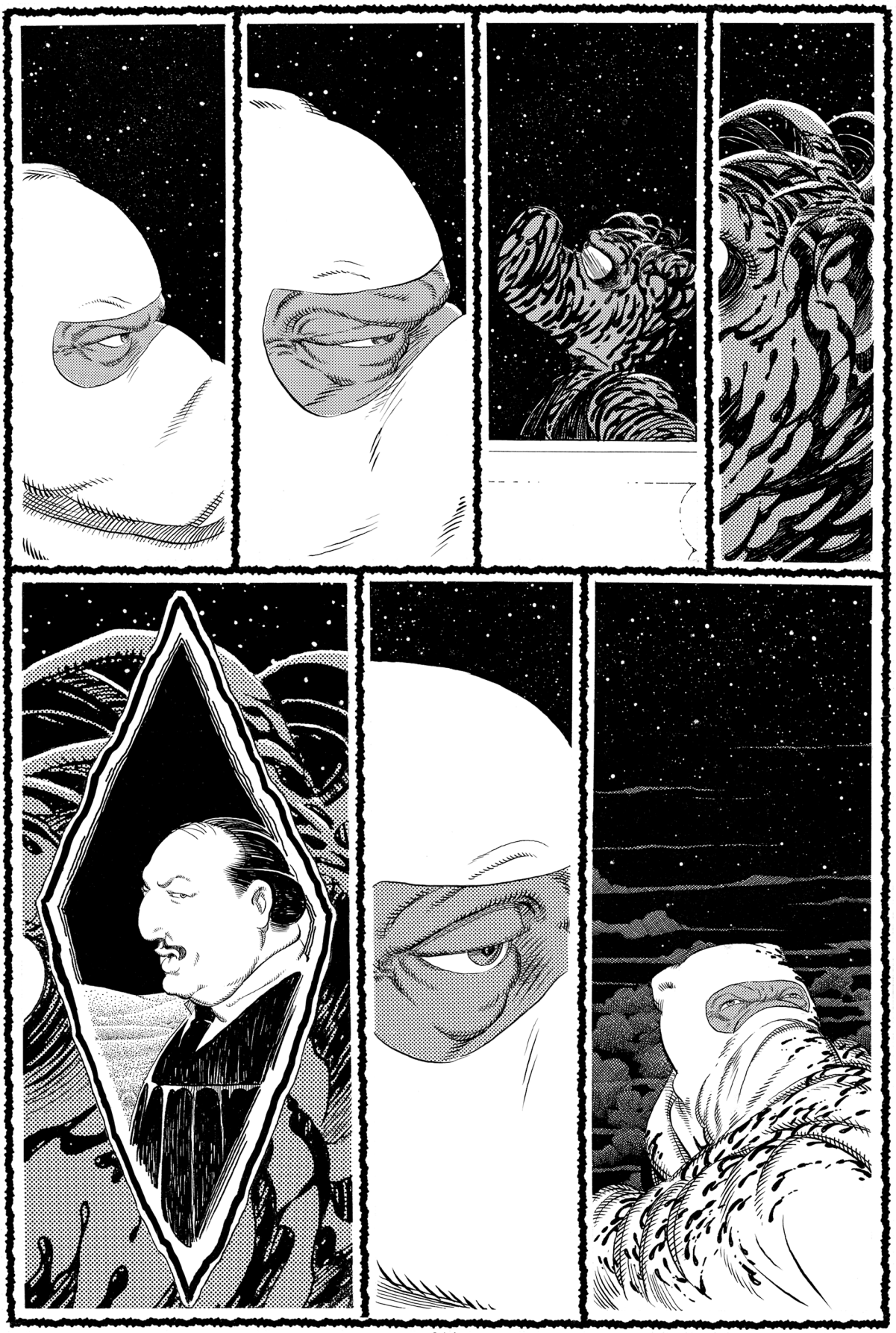


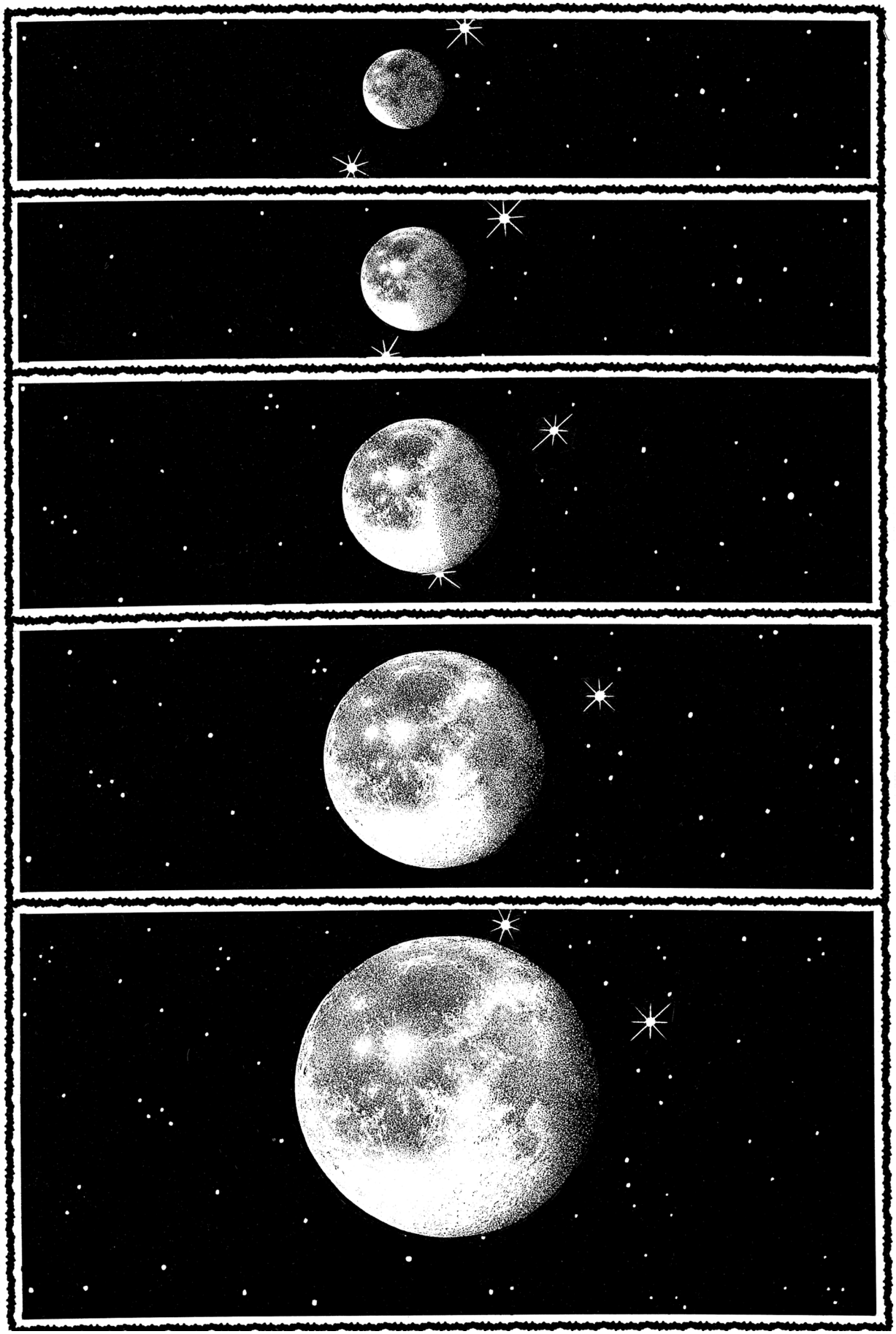












The reader had returned.

The forward screen of the orbiter (or whatever it was) was much larger now and the cramped confines of the cabin had grown more spacious. The reader reclined, gazing up at the thing. "Him," Viktor Davis had said. "It," thought the reader, still stinging from the author's rebuke the issue before. "Him/her," possibly (possibly).

A "her" at the end of *Church & State* did not become a "him" at the end of *Reads* just because Viktor Fucking Davis had changed his mind. Exception and *Consensus*. The reader had been lumped into the latter category and bristled inwardly at the recollection. "Lunatic and *Realist*" was more like it. Without the presence of Exception (Teacher's Fucking Pet was more like it) and Viktor Fucking Davis, the reader was now capable of relaxing and...just looking at him...it...possibly him/her (*possibly*).

It *was* extraordinary. The reader wished for a video camera: all of the curious permutations and imagery which swam across its face, each variation provoking a different emotional reaction, the reader's reactions themselves often inexplicable (why was that one so poignant – that one, just now) and equally transitory. Now joy, *joy*, JOY! The reader squirmed pleasurably in the recliner. That was the reader's favourite. No question about it. With a video camera, the reader could record the thing for hours at a time and edit out all of the ones that the reader didn't like. Well, not didn't *like*; it was all *extraordinary*, awe-inspiring, blah, blah, blah. But the reader couldn't help thinking what an entire tape (two hours, three hours) of the joyful ones would be like. Or a collection of tapes, filed away by category. Joy, poignancy, sadness, anger. The reader could just select the tape that suited the reader's mood – or the reader's *desired* mood. And music. There was no music. No sound whatsoever. The reader could put on a favourite CD that matched the mood on the tape. Although, as the reader sat staring at it, no music came to mind. Rather, several bits of favourite songs played briefly and unsatisfyingly in the reader's recollection, each of them somehow... overwhelmed...by him. It. Vaguely irritated by this, the reader began to wonder if the reader hadn't been too hasty in dismissing "haughty" as a suitable adjective. The reader settled back and impatiently awaited the next "joy" one. There really should be a schedule of "starting times", thought the reader. Like *TV Guide* or...



The reader drew a sharp intake of breath. It suddenly began to accelerate in his (or her/its) movements. Not until that moment had the reader thought that there might be such...variation. The reader waited for Viktor Davis' narration to resume or an on-screen explanation to appear. The reader was transfixed; the reader's first awestricken reaction at the sight of him (it!) returned. What was going on? What was he (it!) doing? Until that moment, all movement had been regular, wavelike. There had been small, subtle variances, a shifting of tempo, but now...now...

The accelerating movement was centrifugal. Its axis seemed to shift. There were still shapes that formed, images roiling in the rotating mass of the thing, but it was no longer calm; all serenity had vanished. Beads of sweat stood out on the reader's forehead; the reader's heart was pounding. Fear and exhilaration, exhilaration and fear. Fuck joy, thought the reader. This is a hundred times better, a THOUSAND times better. The movement accelerated, faster and faster about an epicenter. The reader thought of the Giant Red Spot on Jupiter. And now a column began rising from that Eye, from that Center. It was a funnel cloud of immaculate energy. Within the reader, exhilaration began to fade even as fear claimed dominance. The column was pulsating, wave upon wave of brilliance feeding into it from the thing itself. It surged up and out, and then a mighty wave of energy convulsed about the thing, converging on that (cyclone? tornado?); rising within it until it disgorged a perfect, radiant teardrop shape that...and another! longer this time! distended and more fully...*Another! Braided! Woven!* Fragmenting into beadlike shapes, strands of radiance brilliant against the hard vacuum. It was...

It was...



"Ejaculating," ejaculated Viktor Davis.

The reader was horrified. The reader was intrigued. The reader was disgusted. The reader was drawn. The funnel cloud of energy subsided into itself. The reader followed the trajectory of the beads and the (semen) teardrop shapes, ignoring Viktor Davis' words. In the frictionless medium of the void, their progress was uniform and balletic, as several beaded strands tumbled and turned and...

One segment of beads slowed, stopped and then followed a gentle curve at a right angle to the other strands, dropping several degrees out of its natural arc, contravening the Laws of Motion. Or did it? The reader had a sense that it had been acted on by an outside force, seized by something in the eternal night. It

fell more swiftly, inscribed a tight circle, compressed in on itself. Just as it vanished, there had appeared a radiant pinpoint of illumination: briefly — *very* briefly. It was there. And then it was gone. It was a...a...

"A wink," said Viktor Davis.

"And that," he added, "as is so often the case, is where the trouble began."



Viktor Davis did not elaborate and the reader was relieved. It had seemed to the reader (as reader, author and story had drawn closer together) that Viktor Davis had become something of an impediment. Perhaps that wasn't the right word. An irritant perhaps; interposing a thinly fictionalized self between the reader and the story. The Big Round Glowing White Strange Thing was interesting, fascinating. Beside him (it), Viktor Davis seemed an intrusive carnival barker, a ringmaster stinking of cheap liquor, or an inept interviewer. The reader was watching the surface of the thing as the energy and the storm of activity began to build once more, whirling and heaving. The cyclone column of energy rose, curving up and away from the surface, rhythmic pulsations along its length rising faster and faster. And then subsiding. And then quickening again.

"Come on," said the reader. "Do it."

The reader decided to forgo any further exhortation, as the sound of Viktor Davis' chuckling rumbled through the intercom. At last it ca — issued forth. Expelled radiance arced once more across the darkness, tumbling, hurtling. Disappointedly, the reader watched as the radiance continued into the distance, unobstructed, dissipating, growing smaller, until it was lost from view.



Twice more the ritual repeated itself with no effect. The reader said nothing, simply eyeing the intercom as one might an incontinent pet in the vicinity of an expensive carpet.



Tension began to creep into the reader's shoulders and neck as a considerable length of time passed. The reader was still engaged by the spectacle of the thing, but now all — *all* — seemed but preamble. He was no longer an end in and of himself — the *thing* that was. It. Now he — *it* — was a means to a larger issue of some kind. When the storm upon its surface began a third time, the reader almost missed it. It was less chaotic, almost purposeful. The column of energy that rose from the surface was wider at the base than it had been previously. He seemed to diminish in size in inverse proportion to the greater width and height of the rising cyclone. It stretched forward and out, forming a straight line between the thing and the location of the (wink) former burst of radiance. The radiant matter was expelled, this time in more copious quantities.

"He shoots," shouted Viktor Davis across the intercom.

The reader's palms were damp and trembling. One leg vibrated unconsciously. The reader's eyes widened as a thick strand was pulled from its trajectory, down and away, deflected by some inexplicable gravitational force. It whirled round and round, spiraling into a circle of darkness-within-the-darkness, until it seemed to coalesce, disappearing over some event horizon. A brilliant radiance snapped into being. And then disappeared.

"He *scooores,"* shouted Viktor Davis.



Hers was an act of imitation, at essence. Gathering debris, excretions, holding them immobile, in stasis in that Heart of Darkness. Pressure. Compression. Confinement. Containment. The wink of radiance had been caused by a combination of gravitation, friction and acceleration. But a spark was not a flame. A flame was a different trick entirely.



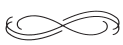
Thump. Thump.

The reader's attentions were aroused by the auditory *non sequitur*. What was that?

"Artistic license," said Viktor Davis. The pounding of the metaphorical female fist into the pocket of the metaphorical female catcher's mitt. That is to say: The Greater Void, the Mother of All Black Holes — having won the metaphorical toss — has elected to receive.

"Right here, baby," she murmurs seductively. "Right here."

The Void, needless to say, has done this before.



More debris, more excretions are captured. Pressure. Compression. Confinement. Containment. In time, the wink is replaced with a steady radiance formed by the continuous imploding and exploding of the compressed debris.



For his part, he was charmed. She was so tiny. So perfect. Of course, her radiance said nothing. No images swam on her surface. She told no story, expressed nothing. Though she was not sublime, she was...endearing, perhaps. Attractive in her own way. It required no leap of insurmountable faith, no complicated rationalisation to arrive at the opinion that her sheer...simplicity? her very lack of...complexity? was, in and of itself, a profound and important expression of...of...*some*thing. He couldn't quite put it into words, but he was (of a certainty) wholly and completely convinced that it was...beyond a shadow of a doubt...*some*thing. *My little something*, he thought to himself, beaming with pride and affection.



Not Alone. He was quite dizzy with joy at this newfound state of *Not Aloneness*. While she agreed, yes, *Not Aloneness* was a very good thing and, yes, it was a big part of what she felt herself, she felt that there was a more...appropriate...term. Togetherness, she suggested. Merely giving voice to the word made her gleam more brightly than before against the backdrop of the stygian firmament. Togetherness, he mused, trying the word on as if it were a sports jacket. If the sleeves were a trifle long (which they were), the stitching irregular and coarse (which it was), the cut of the garment itself lopsided and asymmetrical (decidedly), this was more than outweighed by the fact that she now gleamed *very* brightly, indeed. *Togetherness*, he concurred, vivid, joyful imagery swimming across his radiant countenance. Whatever makes *her* happy, he noted to himself, makes *me* happy.

Togetherness, they said in unison. And then they laughed with the sheer...*Togetherness*...of it all.



His happiness stretched before him, a boundless thing, infinite, radiant *Togetherness*, he would cry, discharging a prodigious shower of debris (his aim was improving, he observed; he almost never missed now).

Alas, *her* happiness was somewhat...short-lived.

Togetherness, she would reply. Only, now – now, the word itself seemed to hang in the void between them, pregnant with a discordant note of...well, of *what* he wasn't really sure. *Some*thing. *Some*thing in the way His Little Something said *Togetherness* just wasn't...quite...right. He confronted her with his observation, seeking clarification.

She demurred. She didn't know what he was talking about. *Togetherness*, she said (duplicating that singular discordant note with the virtuoso precision of an accomplished violinist).

As the reader knows already (or *should*, anyway), this archetypal exchange is an intricate dance which plays itself out in prescribed choreographic patterns. In the interest of brevity, we will "fast forward" through the majority of the tedious do-se-do to the point where, finally, inevitably, at long (and virtually interminable) last, he "corners" her and – *very* much against her ostensible will, only because he is so insistent, *simply* because she so values their...*Togetherness* – she grudgingly, hesitatingly, haltingly, unwillingly allows that, yes, it is True.

There is Something Wrong.

I *knew* it, he gasps (the thought crests upon whitecaps of anxiety hurled upwards from deep waves of self-admiration at the keenness of his insight).

"It's *me*, isn't it?" he asks. She reassures him (radiantly). No, no. it wasn't...*him*, exactly. "*You?"* he asks, deep furrows etching themselves within his imagery. "Well, no. It's not...me, *exactly*, either," she replies.

"Then, *what*..." he queries (his gaze sweeping, in meaningful counterpoint, across the virtually infinite reaches of the black void surrounding them) "*exactly*. Is. It?"

(In this archetypal intercourse, he had great advantage over his numberless successors in the severely limited range of likely suspects.)



"Togetherness," she said (striking the identical dissonant note with the careless confidence of a concert hall pianist), "is wonderful." She didn't want him to... misunderstand. His columns of energy were as magnificent as ever, rising proudly towards her. Very large. Very impressive. Her admiration for his columns was rather much; you know, boundless. And his radiant excretions (his Lovely Little Gifts, as she called them) were very much appreciated. *Very* much appreciated, indeed. They were...

Sweet.

But...

"But?" he prompted.

She struggled to find the right words. She just...felt, she had been wondering, she had this, you know, *feeling*...that they might just, maybe, possibly...

"What?" he queried, endeavouring (unsuccessfully)

to keep any note of exasperation from intruding upon his question.

"I just feel," she remarked offhandedly, "that we could be, you know...

"Closer."



The magnificent imagery yet swam upon his surface. If it was a trifle...murky (let us say), less...sharply defined, it was no less sublime for all of that. To be fair, his attentions were elsewhere now. He had become obsessed with the problem at hand. Since he was *here* and she was *there*...and there seemed no plausible means for relocating one or the other of them...there was only one remaining possibility: a link of some kind, a bridge, something which would connect them. Now he expressed himself (no longer) in mere pictures and shapes, he was concerned (no longer) with mere playful displays and expressions which existed and were created for their own sake. Now he had a Genuine Task, a Purpose — a *Real* Job (if you will). He became architect and engineer, planner and designer, construction worker and supervisor.

Whatever makes *her* happy, he reminded himself, makes *me* happy. If he noticed that on this occasion there was a different inflection to the words than there had been previously, he gave no sign as he set to work.

And her?

Well, she just gleamed, didn't she?



Of course, the only materials at hand were those that he produced from within himself. At first, he merely attempted to excrete his radiances as before, thinking that he could target them to fill the intervening gap and that they might, over time, hook up together and form the basis for a connection which could be made more permanent in their limitless shared future. The problem, of course, was that any strand or fragment of radiance arriving in her proximity quickly vanished into her without a trace, never to be seen again (something about that caused a glimmer of foreboding to sparkle within him; he attributed this to the natural stresses of starting a new job). With a little practice he was able to find the outer perimeter of her gravitational pull and in fairly short order had constructed a radiance extension from himself to the very edge of that voracious field.

"Well, *part* of me is closer to you," he asserted hopefully.

Her radiance gleamed significantly less at this riposte.

"No, huh?" he asked, rhetorically.

Back to the drawing board, he concluded.



"It's the information superhighway without the information."

anon. David Letterman staff writer

Gerhard reads the last of the unfinished manuscript and shuffles the typewritten pages into an orderly pile.

"Fun with Black Holes, eh?" he asks.

"Not me," replies Viktor Davis.

Diplomatically, he adds, "Millions swear by them, though."



And so, this is the end — the terminus of Viktor Davis' *Reads* radiance extension extension — as we leave the Big Round Glowing White Strange Thing to ponder his task. We are at the precipice of a partly completed bridge or archway. Not far away at all, the other half of that bridge, that archway, looms before us. The air is still and it is nighttime. It is time to construct that which will serve as a (temporary? permanent?) connection. Whether it constitutes a story within a story within a story within a story or remains a series of disconnected fragments depends entirely upon your reaction to it. We step into the darkness.

Suddenly, transatlantic voices are heard.



The voices are those of Viktor Davis and Alan Moore. They are locked in earnest conversation, which takes the form of alternating monologues that are disjointed, fragmentary. They digress, they back and fill with words which alternate between the metaphorical and the empirically real (though both would likely favour "real" as an alternative). Alan has recently finished reading issue #182 and there is much to catch up on since their last extended conversation, which had been documented therein. Apropos of nothing (ostensibly, anyway, for such is the nature of their exchange), Viktor Davis "lets fly" with one that he has been saving for just such an occasion:

"As real as today's headlines."

Alan Moore's *basso profundo* laughter cascades over the phone line.



And now, the reader is looking at the page of typesetting the reader is looking at. The reader reads these words. And now, the reader reads these words. Just below the reader's line of sight a decorative flourish appears.



"Life out of balance," Viktor Davis says, speaking to the reader from beneath the aforementioned flourish. "It's a kind of cautionary Zen sound bite. The thing of it is — to me anyway — it doesn't just apply to individuals. It applies to governments, it applies to corporations, it applies to groups of all kinds. Life out of balance." Another decorative flourish appears.



And now? Now, we are at the precise geometric midpoint between the two incomplete halves of the incomplete bridge, the incomplete archway. Here we encounter, suspended like holographic images in the intervening darkness, a small boy and a small girl. They are hunched over a piece of chocolate cake. One of them holds a knife. *This* one's task is to divide the cake into two pieces of equal size. When the task is completed, the *other* gets to choose one of the two pieces of cake.

The surgical precision brought to bear upon this operation by the one with the knife would put to shame the efforts of a world-class neurosurgeon.



And now? Now we are stepping away from explication, passivity. We are abandoning allegories, images and reminiscences. We're going to slip into something a little more...philosophical.

Viktor Davis asks the reader a question.

"What do you think of a woman sleeping with a potential boss to get a job? What do you think of that decision/action?"

There is a wrenching sensation and the reader divides into two separate kinds of awareness: male reader and female reader. They regard one another warily. The male reader says (wisely, instinctively, without thinking), "Ladies first."

As if possessed by demons, as if seized by radiant divinity, a babble of voices erupts from the female reader.

It depends on her situation...has, you know, kids to support or something...husband left her...insecurity and low self-esteem from having been oppressed by the patriarchal...good at the job but no one will give her a chance because she's a...get off welfare...her only chance to...freedom of choice...

"No," Viktor Davis says, interrupting. His eyes are locked onto those of the male reader. "Pay attention," he seems to be saying. "This is important."

"I'm not talking about the individual woman. I'm talking about the act itself. Is it an Act of Bad Faith? Is it Wrong? Is it A Bad Thing To Do?"

...well, of course, I certainly wouldn't...it will certainly or maybe...it might cause or people might see it cause... repercussions to everything, aren't there?...have a wife and kids? To me, that's...really respects and admires him and loves him...thinks she loves him...thinks she thinks she loves him...advise her not to, personally; I mean, those kinds of things always...good thing, can't it? What if she...it gets around the office and she gets a reputation as...

"No," said Viktor Davis patiently. "Let's try it in the form of a mathematical equation. Sexual Harassment Equals A Bad Thing To Do. Therefore, Sleeping With The Boss To Get A Job Equals...?"

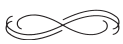
...might have been molested when she was younger, so her response to an authority figure...or a man sleeping with a female boss to get a job. No one would say...or a lesbian, if the boss were a female and a lesbian...

"This," said Viktor Davis, sweeping his arm in a wide half-circle, "is the ravine. No bridge, no part of a bridge, can be built here. Nothing can be built here." As he lit his cigarette, there was a noticeable tremor in his hand.

He exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"Here," he said, looking suddenly drawn, suddenly tired, suddenly old beyond his years:

"Here there be monsters."



Alan Moore's ex-wife and his ex-wife's girlfriend.

This was back in the days when Viktor Davis (or any male, for that matter) dared not say anything out loud in front of Those Sorts of Women. They were out for dinner. Viktor, Alan, Gerhard, Alan's then-wife and Alan's then-wife's girlfriend. The subject of movies came up and (with it) Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*. It had been on "telly" the week before. Alan had had no interest in seeing it. The Two Women had seen it, though, and waxed eloquent on the subject. What a terrible film! The women were all in subservient roles! Both Marys were portrayed as wimps!

All of the disciples were men! The women were just there to do the cooking and the cleaning! Bloody overly glorified servants! (Viktor Davis sits, vibrating with internal rage, chewing his tongue.) Why wasn't there a decent film made about Christ's mother? That's what they wanted to know. "What are you to me, woman?" he says to her – His Own Mother! And what was the big deal about Christ anyway? Didn't...

"To me," Viktor Davis said, endeavouring to keep his tone as level as possible, "that was the whole *point* of the film. Women represent temptation. Women tempt men away from more valuable pursuits into domesticity. The 'angel' who took Christ down from the cross led him into a happy family existence as an ordinary man. Later, when his wife dies, the 'angel' says, Pick another one. It doesn't matter. They're all the same woman with different faces."

This, of course, brought dessert-and-coffee time to a crashing, subzero halt. Viktor Davis dropped the subject in the face of the self-evident impasse. There was nothing left to say on either side. As Alan's wife's girlfriend drove them all back to the house, the car achieved top speeds of between eighty-five and a hundred kilometers per hour. Viktor Davis remembers having two distinct thoughts. One: driving at reckless speeds along narrow English streets in no way refuted the argument he had put forward in the restaurant. Two: if this was Viktor Davis' time to die, he could think of no better way to go than wedged into the back seat of a compact car with Gerhard and Alan Moore, listening with rapt attention as Alan held forth at great, eloquent and insightful length on the subject of the Court of Louis XIV.



Back at the house, over tea and spliffs, Alan's wife asked Viktor Davis if she had remembered to thank him for all the help he had given the three of them in putting together *AARGH* (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia), a benefit comic book. Viktor Davis replied that she had and reiterated that he had been happy to do it.



Viktor Davis had purchased a book on tarot cards for use in the "montage" covers of issues 171, 172 and 173. The tarot card book was published in England in 1973. The Magician and the High Priestess cards are replaced (apart from a token appearance by Aleister Crowley's Magician card) by The Juggler and the Lady Pope.



The same news day that brought word of the death of Jacqueline Onassis addressed itself to Princess Diana rescuing a male swimmer from drowning.



Now. Now we have reached the opposite side of the intervening chasm. Beneath our metaphorical feet is the mirror image of the incomplete (bridge, archway). Behind us now is the story within a story within a story within a story which might be only disconnected fragments: the disconnected fragments which might be the story within a story within a story within a story. Solidity (of a kind) has returned. For the reader who saw only fragments, there are only these words. And *these* words. For the other? A mirror-image reader, visible through the page, beyond the words, rises slowly like a diver ascending from obscure depths; a convergence seems imminent. It is unclear which of these two, the former or the latter, represents "exception" and which represents "consensus".

Viktor Davis stands adjacent to the reader. The two of them are now without context, without setting. The Luke Skywalker orbiter is gone. There is only the Void, the Big Round Glowing White Strange Thing and his tiny, radiant companion at a great remove. It appears that there might (or might not) be something between them. The something is (or is not) nebulous, vague, imprecise.

"A decision has been made; a compromise has been struck," says Viktor Davis. "Something will be lost and there is hope that something will be gained. The decision and the compromise are incomplete halves of a larger idea. Between decision and compromise a thing grows for which there are no words."

He has spoken slowly, as if in a trance. He is quiet for a time and when he speaks again his tone is more conversational.

"I'm staying here. You'll move to a point halfway between myself and them. You'll be able to see exactly what happens from there. When it's time, I'll pull you back."

The reader starts to say something and then stops. Viktor Davis begins to shrink (or perhaps the reader begins to grow: *all stories are true*). A moment later, the author is a mere speck, scarcely visible against the velvet blackness. And then the author is gone.

The reader turns.



The Big Round Glowing White Strange Thing was (relatively speaking) now smaller and the tiny companion was (relatively speaking) no longer tiny. Between them, a radiant column of fire, evocative images

swimming through and around it, stretched across the intervening void, quickening towards her.

It was like an hourglass (*our glass*).

It was like a waterfall (*watch her fall*).

It was an anteater's proboscis stretching, stretching through the darkness, brilliant flashes of light leaping from the tapered end towards her. The event horizon of her gravitational field was now a fiery crescent of gleaming incandescence. As the column of radiance inched ever closer, she began to swell more rapidly, as if she sought to merge with the white hot parabola crawling about her circumference. The reader glanced at him and saw the decision, the compromise. He grew smaller, the imagery on his surface was fading, replaced by a simple and uniform radiance which mirrored her own. The reader glanced from one to the other, scarcely daring to breathe. The base of the column was solid; along its length, waves of energy pulsated and swam, hurtling towards her. Soon (*very* soon) they would be the same size. The column accelerated cautiously. It was long enough. It was *solid* enough.

This is going to work, thought the reader. This is really...going...to...

Something wrenched the reader backwards away from the event even as it reached a climax. The image of the immaculate twin suns receded swiftly from the reader. It made no difference, thought the reader. The die was cast. Any second now, the connection would be made. Any second now.

Simultaneously, the reader saw: the column of fire snap taut, the fiery event horizon seeking to connect with itself (on her opposite side) into a perfect ring, some essence of his (its) being wrenched through the umbilical connection.

The column became whippet-thin, wrenching itself from side to side (she was growing larger and he was growing smaller), whipsawing wildly, the frantic motion of an animal with its (his) leg caught in a trap.

"Something's got to give," thought the reader.

An explosion of white-hot radiance filled the void.

That final image had burned itself into the reader's consciousness. There was something so familiar about it. The frantic, skipping-rope quality of the impossibly thin column: the distended teardrop shape he had assumed in the paroxysm of his death throes. He had looked just like...just like a...a...



"A spermatozoa," said Viktor Davis. The reader blinked several times. A spermatozoa. Yes. That's exactly what he had looked like.



"As stated previously, there is a vast amount of blank canvas for her to work with," said Viktor Davis. "The Void has done this before many, many times: many, many different places. Each time, each place, was a learning experience, an experiment. Because she had, as her goal, Merged Permanence, each of the experiments was a failure. Merged Permanence. She was as certain of the intrinsic *rightness* of her ambition as she was that (once he had adjusted himself to it, once he had given himself over to it entirely and completely, once he gave it a chance) he would feel the same way."

"Separateness, Not Aloneness," she was fond of saying, "*Doesn't Feed the Bulldog*."

Through the miracle of *Cerebus* Technology, it was possible for Viktor Davis and the reader to take a closer look at some of her more commendable attempts.

"Of course, I'm assuming here that you think Merged Permanence is commendable." Viktor Davis regarded his reader with transparent bemusement. His expression reflected his belief that the assumption was so universal in its nature that any qualification of it was, for all intents and purposes, unnecessary.

"Fuck off, Viktor," thought the reader, but said nothing.



"You say you want a revolution?
Well, you know...
We'd all love to see the plan."

John Lennon
"Revolution"

Centrifugal metamorphosis. Ring around a rosey. Orbit. Revolution. It was one of the first of her significant innovations. It required patience, of course – waiting until the two of them were of comparable or nearly comparable size.

The reader could see the two begin to pirouette, circling one another.

Gradually, subtly, she began to make her orbit slightly elliptical (a little gravitational compression here, a little condensing of the void there), slightly out of the horizontal plane, so that they began to move in perfect tandem through space and through time. Swing your partner. The effect of this is easier to see (the two shrank, from the reader's viewpoint, to infinitesimal

size) from a distance and with the aid of a little *Cerebus* Technology Time-Lapse Photography (repeated images of the two climbed in an interlocking spiral).

The Double Helix.



The Arm Game:

The Double Helix pursued its course across the void. Suddenly, one of the repeating images began to wobble – to vary its orbit.

She really didn't know (bat, bat) what was...wrong. Her orbit just seemed to be (bat, bat) decomposing. She felt...strange...dizzy...she thought she might... oooooo...

The Elbow Game:

Very close proximity. *Very* close proximity. There was the wrenching sense of something within him, something vital, slipping away and disappearing into her. After a moment or so, their mutual orbit resumed, but they were very much closer together now: a fact which did not escape his notice.

"The next time," he thought to himself, "she tries that Fainting Shit, I'm going to be ready."

The Wrist Game:

Coming out on the other side, he endeavours to pull as far away as possible, to break free entirely if possible. He turns into a Thumb. She, of course, divides into four fingers (Ms. Get Back Give Him Space, Ms. Stay With Him Stay With Him and –between *them* – Ms. Not That Far Away and Ms. Not That Close).

Bang.



The Leg Game wasn't altogether different from the Arm Game. Until the Wrist (in this case Ankle) thing. He almost breaks free: first on one side and then the other, but all four of them hold on tight (they were ready for him this time). The result? A Big Toe and Four Little Toes.

"The Thumb was more interesting," grouses the Littlest Toe.

"Oh, shut up," snarl her Three Sisters.

Bang.



Then there was the Four Way Void Containment Game, distending him almost (almost) to the breaking point. Distending and Releasing Him, Distending Him and Releasing Him. One, two, three, four, AGAIN! One, two, three, four, AGAIN! One, two, three, four, AGAIN! ...

"See, hon?" she cooed. "We're making beautiful music together."

LUB-dub LUB-dub LUB-dub

The Heart Game.

She just *adored* the Heart Game.

LUB-dub LUB-dub LUB-dub

"See?" she says, translating for the reader. He says, "Me too, my darling one."

LUB-dub LUB-dub LUB-dub

Permanence. Merged Permanence. Wasn't it grand?

"LUB-dub LUB-dub LUB-dub," he said.

"See? I *told* you you'd like it if you gave it a *chance*!"

LUB-dub LUB-dub LUB-dub

Sadly, for him; no Bang.



"A silicon chip inside her head
gets switched to overload"

Boomtown Rats
"I Don't Like Mondays"

The Juggler Game. What is it that he likes? What is it that he dislikes? It was an easy matter to draw away his energy to different areas of compression. That was the first one that I showed you: the "retreating known universe". It could just be two of them: Her and The Other Woman. It could be three, four, a dozen, a hundred. They introduce colour into a black and white situation: alternately heating up and cooling off. Which colour did he choose to "feed"? Which colour was he attracted to? Yellow? White? Green? Blue? A mix of them? They "put their faces on" (as it were). Do you think this colour makes me look fat? It begins, of course, as a pure research project. It evolves into a friendly competition. After a time, the friendly competition becomes a good deal less friendly. The one he feeds turns a brilliant golden. The one he doesn't feed fades to black.

Jackie and Marilyn. Betty and Veronica.

Bang.

"He blew his mind out in a car
He didn't notice that the lights had changed"
John Lennon
"A Day in the Life"



Speaking Viktor Microbe Davis to *Cerebus* Microbe Reader (here in this tiny corner of a tiny corner of a bomb crater, trillions of years after the Big Bang – *Our* Big Bang), there was more than a little artistic license in showing you the swollen red globe being devoured by different-coloured spheres. I'd have to say that ours was not a Juggler Game Big Bang. Ours was a little different.



If he can contain himself (and that is a Big If, to be sure: from Zeus on down, he has –far more often than not – been an indiscriminately Randy Old Bastard). If he *can* contain himself, there is always the remote chance of the Brain, Eyes, Ears, Nose and Throat Game. He divides into two entities: Left Brain and Right Brain, being extremely careful to maintain a solid connection between the two against the relentless and mysterious gravitational pull at work upon them. They talk it over between them: Just What the Hell Are Those Things? Each extrudes a small Globular Scout at the end of a Communication Line to Have a Closer Look and Report Back. Two Small Ones Just Below Us, Sir, and Two Slightly Larger Ones On Our Flanks. Far Below That, There's A Fucking Huge One: A Stomach of Some Kind at The End of a Long Tube. Word comes down from the Joint Left Brain/Right Brain High Command. Snot and Spit Only, No More Ejaculating at or Near the Vicinity of Those Things.

She hates the Brain, Eyes, Ears, Nose and Throat Game.

She just HATES it.



After the Big Bang...after *any* Big Bang...there is a great deal of debris created: solid, liquid and gas. It is one of the primary conceits of the Void that, if you repeat and compound a mistake often enough and long enough, it becomes a miracle. Her rhetorical point being: if you endlessly contain, confine, crush and compress debris until it explodes and then take *that* debris and contain, confine, crush and compress it, spreading his Seminal Energy over a wider and wider area, you end up with something. As with most female logic this is accurate as far as it goes. It goes from here to there. And then it's time to talk about something else.

Yes, dear. Whatever you say, dear.



The White City of Her Offspring (asserts Viktor Davis, not being much of a one for "time to talk about something else" when there's the smell of blood in the air) is what you end up with. Imperfect replicas of imperfect replicas of imperfect replicas. It is for this reason that she is not terribly fond of planets and even less fond of moons. Next to a star, a planet is really rather a poor thing, being little more than a chunk of rock or a big bag of gas. A moon is a poor excuse for a planet. The allegory this represents of those long-ago heady days when Not Aloneness became Togetherness is not lost on her. All matter contains equal (or unequal) measures of the Void, the Seminal Energy and debris. It is Merged Permanence of a kind: mute, ubiquitous and largely unthinking. To the devotees of Merged Permanence (however temporary it proves to be), no sacrifice is too great. The End justifies Any Means. *Any* means.



Our Big Bang was the Mouth Game.

The Arm Game and the Leg Game were practice runs. When it became apparent that he intended to make a break for freedom, there was a certain...hardness... that was required on her part. A kind of Tough Love, if you will. Fingernails and toenails. When a hug just won't do the trick, you need a weapon of some kind. It is...after all...For His Own Good.



Our Big Bang was a sophisticated one.

Yin and Yang.

As Above, So Below.

You Do Me and I'll Do You.

Sixty-nine.
Mouth and Tongue.

Tongue and Mouth.

Or, as she so eloquently put it:

"I Want You Inside Me."

His mistake was in thinking that she meant *Temporarily*.



Her mistake was in thinking that if two snakes eat

each other's tails far enough, they will become a single snake eating its tail. Merged Permanence. They did merge. They formed a circle. She was very much smaller than him (VERY much smaller). This time she extruded something from her surface and he was the one who imitated her. As above, so below. It required great care, a great deal of lubrication, a great length of time, but they did move, one inside the other. Her tongue in his mouth, his tongue in her mouth. In and then out, out and then in. Deep then Shallow, Shallow then Deep. Deeper and then Not So Deep, Not So Deep and then Deeper. Deepest and then Deeper, Deeper and then Deepest. Of course, after Deepest, she wasn't as content with Deeper. After Deeper, she had no interest in going back to Not So Deep. After Not So Deep, Deep just didn't make the grade anymore. As for Shallow:

Where Do You Think *You're* Going?



"The Mouth and Tongue Game was a lot of fun," he thought. He was pretty sure he'd like to try the Mouth and Tongue Game again real soon. He wanted to thank her for showing it to him, but now...

But she wasn't done yet. She wasn't done by a long shot.

That's when the Mouth and Tongue Game became the Mouth, Tongue and Teeth Game. And that's when it stopped being a Game.

"Relax," she said. "What are you so afraid of?"

"Let go," he said. "I mean it."

"You aren't going anywhere," she said.

"Wanna bet?" he queried.

"Try me," she said.



It is uncertain who used their teeth first. It is pretty clear that she got a good grip on the tip of him and that if he tried to pull out all the way, he was going to lose a good chunk of himself in doing so. Hers, of course, was a lot smaller. And his teeth, naturally enough, were a lot bigger. And she wasn't trying to pull away. On the contrary, hers was as deep in his mouth as she could get it.

He got all of it on the first try.

He swallowed it. It came to be known, thereafter, as an Adam's apple.

Bang.



It was a failed experiment, but it was a pretty close balance. Can two snakes eating each other's tails become one snake? Is the resulting snake a snake or is it something else entirely? What would a being that was half mouth and half tongue look like? Would you let your daughter marry one?

Interesting questions.



Blood and Semen.

As Alice Cooper so eloquently put it, "Only Women Bleed."

Semen and Blood.

Red and white. White and red.

We are our corpuscles.

We are approaching headlights.

You are retreating taillights.

We are different, fundamentally, irrevocably.

We are as different

As Night and Day.



On this blue-and-white spinning ball, we are (so far as we know) unique. Life is born, life devours or is devoured by other life; life procreates, life dies. Where life merges, there is painful, agonizing death on one side and a filling, gorging life sustainment on the other. Where life merges temporarily, there is pleasure, exhilaration, closeness and climax.

We are the Upright Ones, columns rising against relentless gravitational force. It is our thinking, our reasoning which sets us apart. There is no such thing as Thinking Violence. Violence, by its nature, is Unthinking. Violence is Emotional (in a word). Emotion is Void Residue, the Emptiness between our molecules, which is as one with the Eternal Night.

Void unites with Void. A shared emptiness is declared fullness. Big things consume little things.



The reader and Viktor Davis are sitting side by side

on a small sofa in the lobby of a large and opulently furnished hotel. It is nighttime and, apart from the distant whir of a vacuum cleaner dislodging bits and fragments of debris, absorbing and containing them, all is quiet. There is a sound of approaching footsteps on the black-and-white checkered marble floor.

"Mr. Davis?"

"Yes."

"Your driver phoned to say that he's had a little car trouble. He won't be here for another hour or so."

"All right."

"If you'd like, sir, I could arrange for a different car with another company."

"No. By the time they woke up a driver and got over here, it would probably be another hour, anyway, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose it would."

"It's all right" Viktor Davis glanced at the reader. "We've got a few more things to talk about."

"Yes, sir."

The concierge turned and was gone.



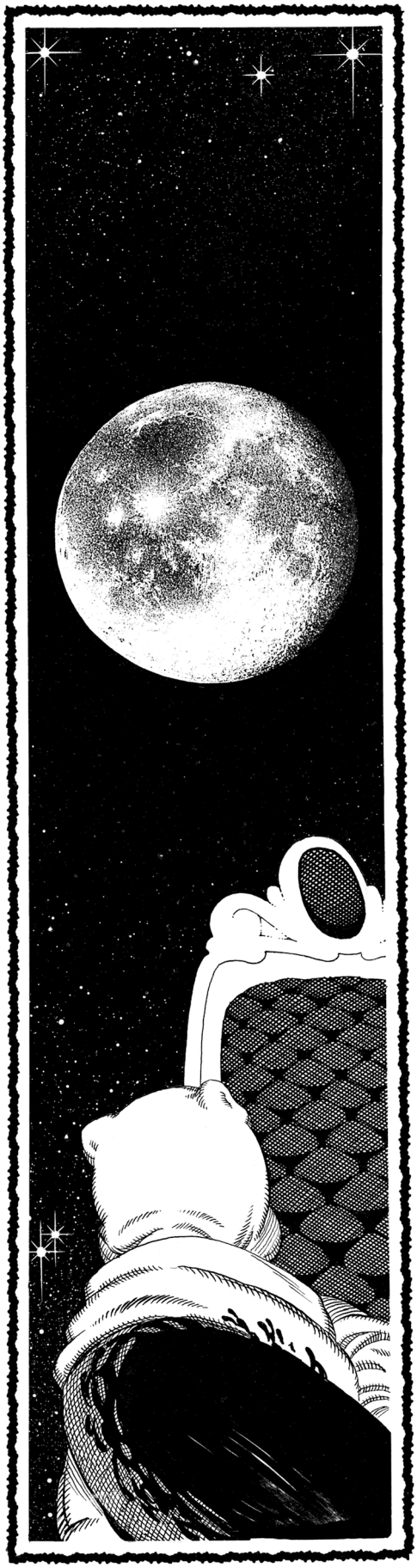
Viktor Davis lit a cigarette.

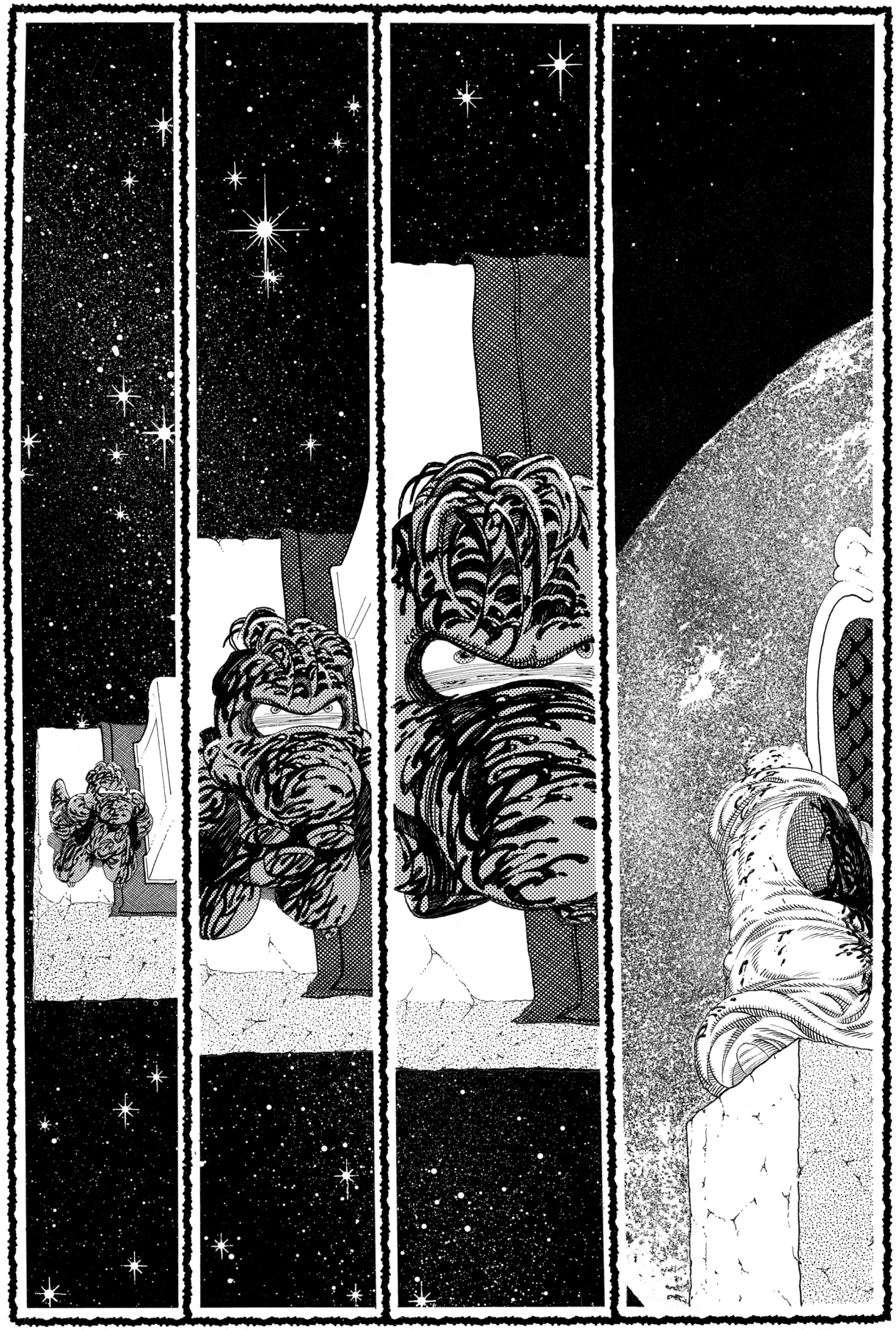
"Just one more," he said.

The reader looked doubtful.

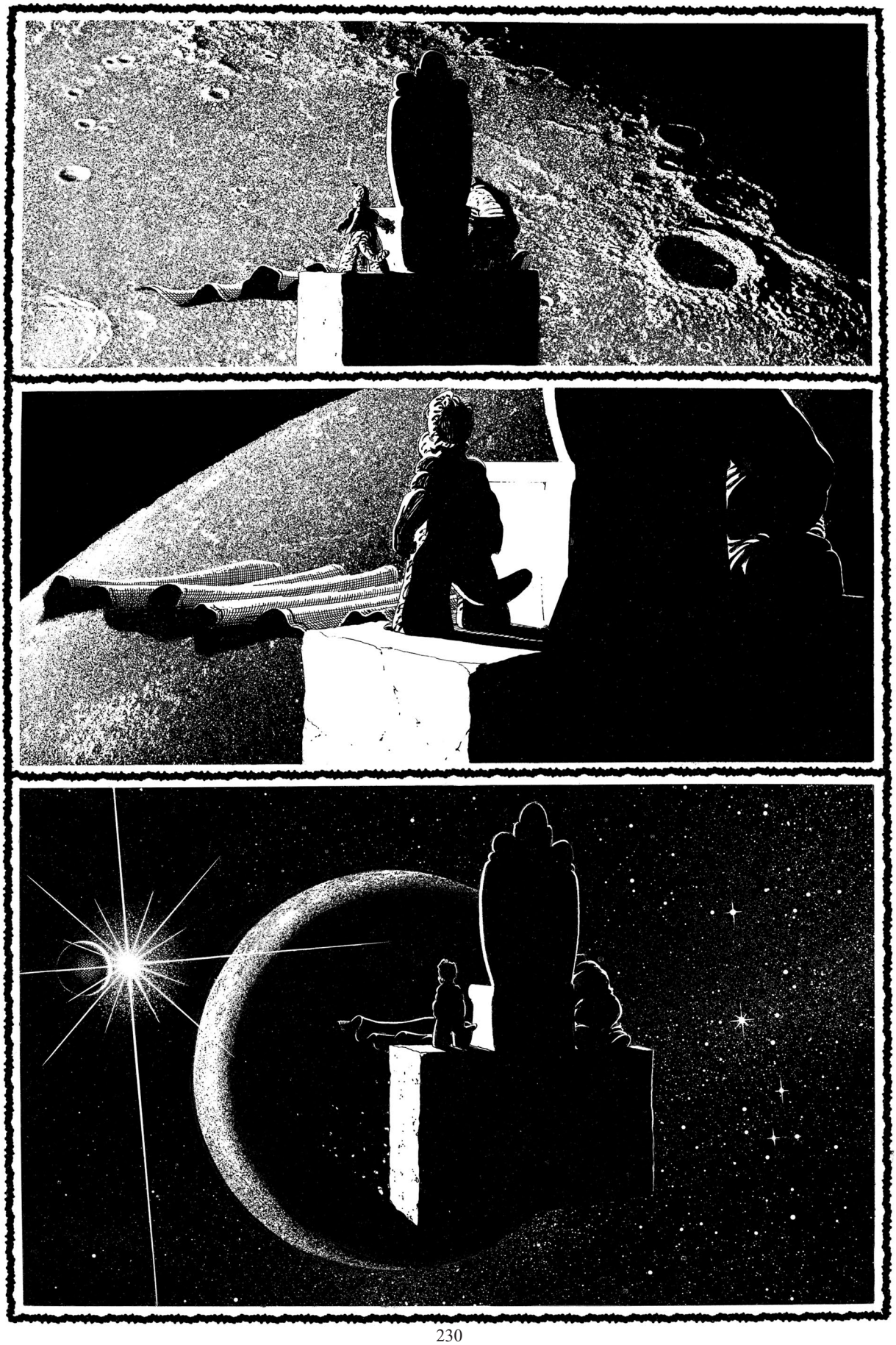
"No, no. Not the cigarette," Viktor laughed. "I meant one more visit. Issue #186."

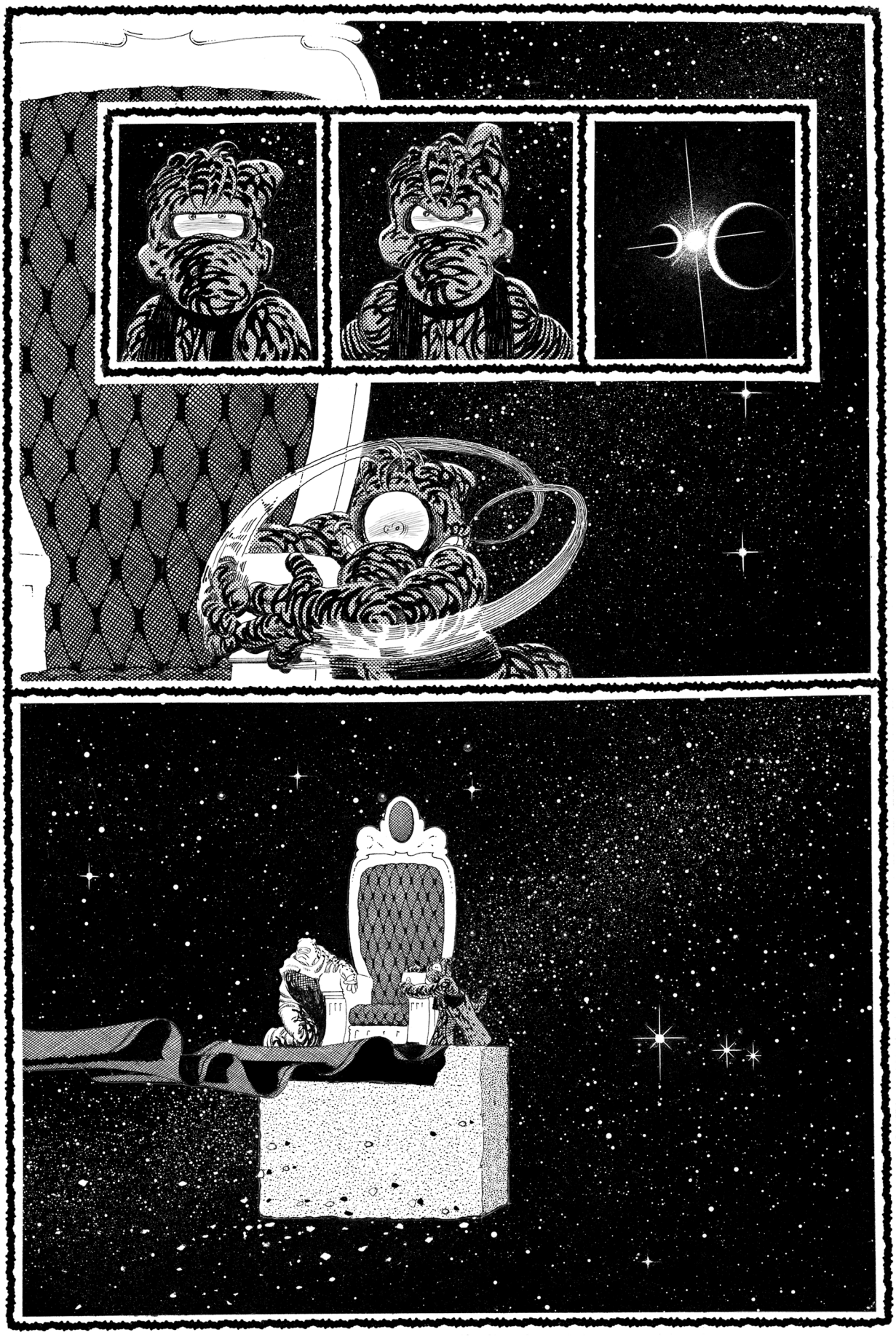
"And then," he added, "we go our separate ways."











Viktor Davis stared out the window of the second-floor office at a grim and grey June weekend. The opulently furnished hotel lobby where he had left the reader was gone. Reality had replaced fabrication. The reader was now back in the reader's customary place, two, almost three months distant from the author. It looked more like September than June out there, he thought. There was a strange satisfaction in that. Issue #186 would ship in September.



The Female Void and the Male Light. Viktor Davis sat contemplating the inch-high stack before him: typewritten pages extensively annotated, yellow-lined note paper, assorted photocopies of magazine articles and newspaper clippings. The elaborate notes rambled for a few paragraphs or several pages, invariably stopping in mid-thought, mid-sentence.

The Female Void and the Male Light. He riffled through the unkempt pile of paper, pausing occasionally to read some fragment or other: "real world" examples of the Female Void and the Male Light. Religion, politics, the academic world, entertainment.

"More heat than light."

That was a good one.

"More Female Void than Male Light", "More Emotion than Reason". It was a perfect snapshot of the modern Female Void Age. Emotion was preeminent, ruling virtually without opposition in the Life Out of Balance world of the last decade of the twentieth century, infecting all aspects of human existence. *All You Need is Love.* "Yeah?" snarled Keith Richards. "Try payin' the fuckin' rent with it." Viktor Davis smiled to himself.



Another fragment. JFK in the final year of his life, being driven to some event or other. With him in the car is Tony Bradlee (wife of Jason Robards of the *Washington Post*) or perhaps another of the interchangeable Washington Wives.

"Mr. President," she asks him point blank, "have you ever been in love?"

"No," he answers matter-of-factly, adding with a sudden flash of his characteristic grin, "came close a couple of times, though."



Journalism had been an early casualty in the war between the Female Void and the Male Light. "How do you *feel*?" had virtually replaced "who, what, where, when and why" as the journalistic cornerstone. "What are you *feeling right now*?" Every once in a great while, the Female Void would run afoul of some military figure or a police captain or a fire marshal: some male who had not been devoured whole, who still had something of himself left to call his own. His answer would begin, "I think..." or "I believe..." and he would proceed to enunciate a belief, a principle, an ideal which was, to him, fundamental. The Female or Male Feminist (they differ only cosmetically from each other) interviewing him would be dogged in his or her pursuit: "But how do you *feel* as an individual, as a person, as a human being?" The interview subject would invariably look confused, discomfited at this. After all, he had just *answered* the question. He would paraphrase his belief, his principle, his ideal. "I think..." I believe..." At this point the he/she interviewer switched, invariably, to another satellite feed: to another journalist or a psychologist or a social worker. Reasoning, Thinking Males with Systems of Belief, made for very bad television.

I watched an interview the other night on *CBC Prime Time* with a nineteen-year-old girl from an old-fashioned (which is to say "principled") Vietnamese family. She had gotten pregnant during her last year of high school. She knew that she had brought "shame" to her father, to her family. "But this is a free country, isn't it?" she asks the camera. "That means you can do whatever you want, doesn't it?" The camera was indulgently mute on the subject. The girl moved on. She *felt* scared that she was going to be a mother. She *felt* unhappy that she had been disowned by her father, but she also, you know, *felt* happy when her mother called to tell her that she would answer any questions that she had about pregnancy. She *felt* most enthusiastically about her school guidance counsellor because he had, you know, just listened to her "spill her guts" and hadn't tried to, you know, make her *feel* bad. At no time, needless to say, did the word "think" cross her lips. There is, of course, no need for her to think. The taxpayers of Canada will pay for all of her baby's needs. She didn't need to be made to *feel* bad. All that she needed was someone to direct her to the appropriate agency. The rest of it was just paperwork. It's a free country, isn't it?

That means you can do whatever you want.

Doesn't it?



Unbidden, the image of the *Cerebus* Theatre swam

to the surface of Viktor Davis' awareness. He turned away from his typewriter and allowed the picture to coalesce in his mind's eye.

The *Cerebus* readership was there, composed in some (small? large?) measure of females with their male house pets. He squinted, endeavouring to see if any male was chafing at the invisible conduits and metaphorical tubing which drained his life, his essence, his energy as surely and as effectively as any fictional vampire. Cats' eyes gleamed in the darkness, filled with malice. A couple of rows back, an obese brunette was stripping away chunks of brain tissue from a thin, pale youth with a spotted face. His head lolled against his shoulder in her direction, his face radiant with ecstasy. He turned to her, his eyes half-lidded. He smiled and mouthed, "I love you." She smiled back at him, indulgently. His eyes closed once more. She stuck out her sandpaper tongue, dotted with brains and blood, in Viktor Davis' direction and then cackled loudly. The youth giggled quietly to himself.

To the far left, in the front row, the white husk of a heavyset man in his early thirties squirmed in the direction of his Lady and Master, his features reflecting pain, confusion and fear. She held his forearm in front of her as if they were bound, one to the other, but in such a way that she was also holding him slightly apart from her. Viktor Davis could see that the fellow had been a quick meal – little more than a snack, by the looks of things. Traces of dried brain-matter, hard and uninviting, encrusted what little there was left of the top of his head. She looked very, very hungry. Every few seconds she turned around in her seat, the hunger in her gaze sweeping across the rows to her immediate rear. Females touched by that insatiable stare hunched a little closer to their own house pets, a menacing growl rumbling low in their throats.

Viktor Davis turned back to his typewriter.

"There is no cure for willful stupidity," he typed and then sat back, cigarette in hand, to contemplate the words.

He thought of the scene in the movie, *Cisco Pike,* where a character played by Harry Dean Stanton worries aloud to the title character (played by Kris Kristofferson) that he doesn't think he will be able to "get it up" with one of the two women they have picked up for the evening. "Man," says Kristofferson, "it's not your body they're after, it's your goddamn soul." Stanton blinks several times and a look of relief crosses his features. "Thanks, man," he says.

There is no cure for willful stupidity.



"Yes," said Viktor Davis, "I am being brutal here."

In contemplating the full weight of popular culture, television, movies, magazines and newspapers, I see the completely unopposed advocacy of Merged Permanence and I think that a definite brutality is called for. The Male Light is jeopardized on all fronts, in my view. The Devouring Rapacious Female Void is not a thing to be taken lightly, to be explained away, to be rationalised into neutrality. I'm not here to make you feel good. I am here to make you think. And to make you think, I have to make you see.

Emotion, whatever the Female Void would have you believe, is not a more Exalted State than is Thought. In point of fact, I think Emotion is animalistic, serpent-brain stuff. Animals do not Think, but I am reasonably certain that they have Emotions. "Eating this makes me Happy." "When my fur is all wet and I am cold, it makes me Sad." "Ooo! Puppies!" "It makes me Excited to Chase the Ball!" Reason, as any husband can tell you, doesn't stand a chance in an argument with Emotion. There are no rules to Emotional Argument. You simply wander around in rhetorical circles until you feel Happy again, and then the argument is over. This was the fundamental reason, I believe, that women were (rightly) denied the vote for so long. In order to move a civilisation forward, an overview is required. You have to be able to step back and examine the structure of a problem. This is what Thinking, Reasoning, is. Every political campaign waged in the G-7 countries has as its centerpiece Job Creation. Polls give the politicians a list of voter concerns. Job Creation is at the top of the list. Ergo, the politicians promise Jobs. Because the Female Void dominates the proceedings (simply because the Female Void dominates everything), a candidate is elected based on how he or she makes the electorate Feel. We Feel we can Trust this candidate. No effort is made to step back and ask, 'Isn't the whole *point* of technology to *eliminate* work?' Reason would tell you that you can either eliminate (or limit) technology or you can eliminate (or limit) jobs. It is not possible to have it both ways. The Female Void Emotional response is that we have to have it both ways. And so we do. And so the problem gets worse instead of better.

I think of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, the Continental Congress, Illuminated Thinking, the Finest Hour of the Male Light, dealing with the specific problem of Independence. What did they want to do? What did they not want to do? What innovations had past cultures brought to bear on limiting the ability of government to interfere in the lives of its citizens? Where had other cultures gone wrong and what could be done to prevent and correct those mistakes? They did brilliant work. *Brilliant* work. I am reasonably certain that such Male Light yet exists in our day and age, and I am equally certain that it avoids the political arena like the plague. In our Female Void Age it is the sole job of elected officials to

make the electorate feel good about them frequently enough to get reelected. Reelection is largely a matter of provoking a positive emotional response within a narrow time frame through televised portrayal, the raising of sufficient funds to make that televised portrayal ubiquitous, and (apart from that) having the good fortune to have no deviations from the Female Void Emotional Perception of Merit (drugs, boozing, women on the side) come to light at an inopportune moment. We do not elect leaders. We elect televised portrayals of Husbands and Fathers. Women (because of the double standard of Female Void Emotional Perception) are elected as televised portrayals of Good Career Women. If she looks like she would be a Good Boss, it is not necessary that she be a Wife and/or Mother. Thinking, the ability to Reason through a problem and put a solution into effect, is very low on the list of priorities, if it is on the list at all. Legislative Assemblies are filled, throughout the civilised world, with televised portrayals capable of provoking an emotional response in their respective constituents. We have been treading water for some time and show no indication of endeavouring to swim any time in the foreseeable future. Political positions are judged on the Emotional Basis of whether they are Popular or Unpopular. Popular is good. Unpopular is bad. Most political positions based on Reason are Unpopular. Most political positions based on Emotion are Popular – provided the Emotion provoked is happiness; if the Emotion provoked is unhappiness or anxiety or uneasiness, then that political position is Unpopular and therefore bad.

Does this make any sense to you? Or does it just make you feel bad?



Male Light does not Merge. Thinking, Reason, is best served by solitude, isolation. Intellect "works through" problems, changing impediment into insight, oversight into overview, stalemate into solution. A "Big Picture" emerges at the "end of the day", but the day itself is long, composed exclusively of examination and reexamination. History is filled with examples of Great Minds being brought together by the Merged Void's emotional and idiosyncratic belief (or, rather, feeling) that "two heads are better than one'" On occasion, they are able to "strike sparks" off one another or they manage to trigger mutual or complementary insights in their respective fields of endeavour through interaction. It is far more likely that they will pass a pleasant hour or two exchanging small talk on a variety of mundane subjects and then go their separate ways, none the worse for intellectual wear and tear, much to the collective disappointment of the Assembled Voids who are without a glimmer of understanding of intellectual processes and who assume that the Male Light is the same as the Merged Void, "only different". More than one Society Hostess having brought together (say) a Nobel Prize-Winning Author and a Critically Acclaimed Playwright at her dinner party (after the fashion of breeding one thoroughbred horse to another) has been disillusioned to find, upon her return, no shining literary offspring in evidence, their conversation dominated instead by the Yankees' chance of holding first place in the American League East.



Light does not Breed. Only Jackie Onassis (and like-minded Voids) could perceive her Arrow Shirt Ad Son as having anything in common with his late father, apart from a weakness for blonde actresses.



"Two heads are better than one" has much in common with "two can live as cheaply as one". It represents, at its core, the Merged Void raking the Male Light with its Emotion-based fingernails. There is little empirical evidence to support either statement. As the Emotional Female Void devours what is left of the civilisation which has been built by the Rational Male Light, it has extrapolated the former maxim into Larger and More Efficient Voids ("If two heads are better than one, think how good a dozen heads will be!"). Study Groups, Steering Committees, Regional Advisory Boards, Crown Commissions, *et cetera, et cetera; ad nauseam*. While it is a basic truth that Light does not Merge, that Light does not Breed, Voids do nothing else. The Merged Void represents Consensus. It is a purely Emotion-based belief (or, rather, *feeling*) that through Consensus, one arrives at "Truth" (or, rather, Truth).

In a recent interview, Eddie Campbell, a Considerable Male Light in this Age of the Female Void, discussed his experience as a brief (and much-amused) participant in the creativity-by-committee of Comics' Greatest World (hyperbolic nomenclature being a hallmark of the Merged Void). He observed that the family cat in the Campbell household had been named by committee and that it had taken a full quorum of family members the better part of several hours to arrive at "Puss". If one looks closely at the work that is done by the Merged Voids which are devouring our culture, much of it could most charitably be described as "naming cats". The period of time it takes to arrive at "Puss" is directly proportional to the number of "heads which are better than one" assigned to the task.

As a parenthetical aside, several meetings were held at Dark Horse to determine whether or not there would be an apostrophe affixed to "Comics' Greatest World".



What motivates this behaviour? What informs the sensibilities of those who sit tapping pencil against pad, looking thoughtful, portraying themselves as the Good and Dutiful Committee Member? What keeps them from standing up and raising the point of order (Mr. Chairperson) that if brains were dynamite, there wouldn't be enough in this room to blow up a paper bag?

Patriarchy? The imposition of Male Power which restrains and endlessly postpones the Dawning of the Glorious Female Golden Age?

I beg to differ.

Behind this Lesser Void of White Collar Make-Work Programs, the stultifying sameness of ass-covering and ass-kissing, the endless postponement of decision-making in favour of "further study", "further discussion", lies the Greater Void, the Omnivorous Engine which drives every committee, every study group, every institutionalised waste of human time and energy, which drives, in point of fact, our entire degraded society.

The Wife and Kids.

If we're going to be able to afford that new dining-room set, I'm going to have to get that raise. If I'm going to be able to get enough money for the down payment on the house, I'm going to have to pull a lot of overtime. If I'm going to pay for the new living-room furniture and the ballet lessons and the tuition at the private school, I'm going to have to get that promotion.

In one of those Poor Us studies for which the Emotional Female Void is notorious, it was pointed out that after a divorce, the average male standard of living rises by (pick your own ungodly number) percent. The average female standard of living drops by (pick your own ungoddessly Poor Us number) percent. This was presented (of course) as living proof of the unfairness of the Global Economic Structure. I think the more rational explanation is that the excision of a five-to-six-foot leech from the surface of a human body means that that body is going to have more of its own blood in its own veins. Unless the leech finds another body, it is going to go hungry. *(Please don't call us leeches, huffed the leeches, we prefer the term "asset-challenged".)*

Corporations, a living example of the Merged Void if ever there was one, always show a preference for the Family Man when it comes to promotions and positions of responsibility. In the case of Merged Voids, as with most other permutations of existence, It Takes One to Know One. Corporations (or companies of any size, really) wink knowingly at the Little Woman and Her Brood. Once the Male Light has disappeared over the Event Horizon, once the manacle of gold has been pounded into place on the ring finger of his left hand, he is, indeed, a Wage Slave. What goes unsaid (or, rather, what has gone unsaid until now) is that he serves Two Mistresses, Twin Voids. As he labours to make his mortgage payments, pay for groceries, little Axelrod's College Fund, the new sofa, the new drapes, the bigger house, the Company can rest easy. In labouring to fill the insatiable Void Need for material possessions at home, his time and his energy and his spirit disappear into the Vaginal Bottom Line of the workplace. Divorce, once badly thought of, has yielded even greater benefits. The employee with a Wife and Mistress, and later a Wife and an Ex-Wife (and still later a Wife, an Ex-Wife and a Mistress) is very much rocking to the beat of the Merged Void. Assuming he's going to get a little ahead of himself, the Bank Void steps in with an easy payment schedule.

Ah, success.



Viktor Davis smiled to himself.

He had been fascinated by power all of his life, and in the Wife and Kids he had found its greatest manifestation in human society. He turned and regarded his readership once more.

A bright-eyed fellow in a dark-blue suit — his shirt lightly starched, his red-and-black-striped tie neatly pressed — locked eyes with Viktor Davis. He smiled and in his smile there was great pity. Over his shoulder there was visible a slim, young woman with green eyes. She lapped delicately at the open wound within the desiccated remains of his temple.

"I understand what you're talking about," he said. "We know this couple, see? Man, they are just the absolute picture of what you just described. What you don't realise is that there *are* good women in the world. You just haven't found the right one, yet. That's all."

Viktor Davis took a drag from his cigarette and expelled a series of small smoke rings. The bright-eyed fellow and Viktor Davis stared into each other's eyes for a period of several seconds. One corner of the bright-eyed fellow's smile twitched slightly and the merest trace of anxiety crossed his features. The slim, young woman took a deep bite from the wound. He closed his eyes and the smile broadened. "You'll see," he said, leaning towards her. "You'll see."



Viktor Davis turned back to his typewriter and his pile of notes, which he began thumbing through absentmindedly. One of the scrawled observations on a torn piece of yellow-lined notepaper caught his eye.

The Male Light and the Female Void: Seminal Energy and Omnivorous Parasite. As ancient as the sacrifice of a Corn King. As ubiquitous as a hundred generations of Roman Catholics eating the flesh and drinking the blood of a Great Prophet.



Paper-clipped to that one:

What was the essence of Jesus' philosophy but the reformation of Judaism as constituted in his time? "You consume an elephant and excrete a gnat," he scolded. In regarding the centuries-long work that Merged Voids had committed upon the Word of God, layers of interpretation upon layers of interpretation upon layers of interpretation, the Word itself so obscured that little remained but the Profession of Interpretation itself, he had attempted to inject a note of sanity into the proceedings:

"You know, if you just say *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*, you could probably knock a good four hundred pages out of the rule book right there."

What he failed to recognise was that the Letter of the Law is the province of the Merged Void. It is only the Male Light that is concerned with its Spirit.

Too sensible.

Too much Light.

Bang Bang Bang



Not surprisingly, it was a European who first broached the subject of the Woman Who Would Come Between Gerhard and Viktor Davis. The occasion was the 1993 Wondercon. Apropos of nothing, Jean-Marc Lofficier had launched into an eloquent soliloquy on the subject. No, that wasn't quite accurate. They had been discussing Getting to Issue Three Hundred, and Europeans, having had a longer and more insightful association with the Unfairer Sex, knew that Getting Hit By a Bus (the North American impediment of choice) ranked a distant second, both in terms of likelihood and severity of consequence. At one point, Lofficier had used one of his employers, Moebius, as an example (Viktor Davis had forgotten the entirety of it, but evidently friend Moebius was caught between the Rock of his Present Void, the Hard Place of his Past Void, and His Little Yum-Yum On the Side, or some such thing). Lofficier was surprised to find that Viktor Davis had given the matter a great deal of consideration, that (uncharacteristically for a North American) he recognized it as a primary and central danger. Viktor Davis explained that he had chosen the course of Sequential Temporary Voids: he had no problem with an infrequently offered candidate sitting on his knee for a while, but The Big Chair to Viktor Davis' Left Stayed Empty.

Jean-Marc wished Viktor Davis luck, but expressed his sincere conviction that such restraint was not possible in the long term. How very French, thought Viktor Davis. At that moment, Viktor Davis' Then-Current, Now Ex-Temporary Void (probably the best-known secret at that year's Wondercon, apart from Neil Gaiman and *his* Temporary Supplementary Void) sidled up.

"So, what are you boys talking about?"

Viktor Davis smiled.

"We've just finished."



"I am alone," said Viktor Davis. "I am not lonely. There is a big difference."

I have not had a Merged Permanence in my life for five years. It took at least three of those five years for my brain to start functioning properly again. In the aftermath of being part of a Merged Void, all that is left for some time is Void Residue: Emptiness, Fear and Emotional Hunger. It is these three and the endless, fruitless search for a Permanent Cure that the Emotional Female Void calls Love. If you merge with that sensibility, you will share in its sickness. No matter what you pour into it, it remains empty; no matter how you reassure it, it remains afraid; no matter how much of yourself you permit it to devour, it remains hungry. If you look at her and see anything besides emptiness, fear and emotional hunger, you are looking at the parts of yourself which have been consumed to that point.

The ability to be alone, to have isolation as your primary state of existence, will serve you in good stead in any situation in which you find yourself. The ability to live in Merged Permanence teaches you only how to function within the context of Another's neuroses, inadequacies and failings. It teaches you how to use your own neuroses, inadequacies and failings as both cudgel and petition. When the Merged Permanence ends; whether next week, next year, five years from now, ten years from now, you are left with completely useless life skills, emptiness, fear and emotional hunger.

Fuck dancing. Let's talk about Art.



Years ago Jules Feiffer and I were talking about Norman, and someone asked, "How

come these Jews get married so often?" Jules replied, "Because they can afford it." And he was exactly right. Saul Bellow with his greater conservativeness would never have been able to marry four times if he hadn't had the money and I wouldn't have married three times if I, to my surprise, hadn't been able to afford it either.

Alfred Kazin
Peter Manso's *Mailer: His Life and Times*

According to Town & Country *magazine, raising a child to age 18 costs $679,000 U.S.*

news item

While, for Viktor Davis, it was a source of great amusement to watch Captains of Industry, Pillars of the Community, the Suit-and-Tie Brigade devoured by the Emotional Female Void, (their resources, lives and energy disappearing over the Event Horizon of Merged Permanence), the Joke, to put it mildly, lost something of its flavour when it came to Artists. Would that he could conjure a podium, a venue, and assemble all the creative Male Light in one place.

"Women," he would say, "are not Muses."

Muses are Muses. To confuse one with the other is to mistake the Devouring Void for the Seminal Light. Earthly Women and the Muses are ancient, sworn enemies. The battlefield is the Creative Male. On the one side is the encampment of Discordia, of Diana, of Venus located in his Heart and in his Groin. On the other is the Bastion of Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia and Urania, in his Brain and in his Mind. The Muses are tolerant and understanding of border raids, skirmishes, and harassing maneuvers. Throughout the history of the Male Light, there have been few painters, few writers, who have not had a She Who Must Be Accommodated. For some it was their mothers. For many their wives, their mistresses, their girlfriends. For many it was their daughters, a favourite waitress, a stripper, a whore. To the Muses, they are all one. Mother, whore, wife, daughter, stripper, waitress, mistress, girlfriend.

Women inspire men to do great works
And then distract us from carrying them out.

Oscar Wilde

It is up to each individual Male in whom the creative fire burns, in the words of Pater, "as a hard, gem-like flame" to decide whether to maintain that radiance, whether to settle for a wavery, uncertain light, or whether to extinguish it altogether. The individual Male decides for himself which side in the ancient battle is the better armed, who gets the best reinforcements, the most effective weapons, whose barricades are solid and well-fortified, and whose are makeshift and ramshackle. John Lennon maintained through his house-husband years of baking bread and minding the baby that he had "lost his Muse". Untruer words were never spoken. He drove his Muse from him. The forces within his Groin and his Heart, armed to the teeth, legion upon legion upon legion, surrounded those forces in his Brain and in his Mind, and the battle was lost. John Lennon was a triumph for the malignant forces of Discordia, of Diana, of Venus.



Viktor Davis did not, for the most part, consider actors to be Artists (or even artists). There was more of the Void than the Light about them. How many decent movie scripts had been twisted and transmogrified at the whim of a "bankable name"? Actors were a great part of the problem in this regard. Movies were no longer stories, they were "vehicles", voracious Black Holes of degraded currency, tailored to the perceived requirements of the non-creative. He stared at the four quotes, extracted carefully from the murky Emotional Female Void which was the essence, the sum and the substance of *Vanity Fair* magazine. Fuck it, he thought. It's not as if it's Keanu Reeves or Kevin Costner or some shit; it's Jack Nicholson:

My type of man is not attracted to society at this moment. The fun is gone. There is a quiet desperation in it all. I've been a very social person all my life. So, if I'm backed off, if all my type is backed off, then the fun quotient, in my opinion, is going to drop.

You only lie to two people in your life: your girlfriend and the police. Everybody else you tell the truth to.

Today, you've got endless women in their 20's and 30's who don't know if they want to be a mother, have lunch, or be secretary of state.

This is so far below where I had hoped the battle would be pitched that I'm not interested.



There is a wonderful story about Pablo Picasso at work in his studio on a mural of some kind. Both his wife and his mistress ended up in the studio and (naturally enough) an argument began. The argument became more and more heated and finally erupted into

an all-out hair-pulling, claws-and-teeth cat fight. Picasso never once turned around. He just kept working.

I love that story.



Alan Moore decided some months ago that, rather than have some sort of tedious mid-life crisis, he would endeavour to become a Magician, a Shaman. Alan Moore, needless to say, is very good at everything he attempts. He is a very strong-willed person, very insightful, very balanced, very stable. As these are not, by any stretch of anyone's imagination, common traits in the Age of the Female Emotional Void Triumphant, I will forgo even the most cursory recitation of the Means by which he set about accomplishing his task. Take it or leave it; in the Viktor Davis scheme of things, the possible repercussions of a member of his readership ignoring a Kids, Don't Try This At Home disclaimer supersedes the author's interest in satisfying your curiosity.

Leaving aside the Means, the End (or one of them anyway) was a visit to the Big White Room. They were all there, Alan informs me. Hawksmoor, Crowley, Vitruvius, Thomas Hobbes, this one and that one. All the Mages of the Ages. "They are just who they say they are," Alan observed. "The Illuminati. Not Jewish Bankers and Worldwide Conspirators. The Illuminated Ones." I asked if Alan just, you know, saw them or if he had any kind of exchange with them.

"You know, Viktor, I looked around and I noticed there weren't any women in the room. And I said to" (I forget which one he said it was: doesn't matter), "There are no women. Is this some kind of faggy boys' club or something, then?"

This, according to Alan, generated a good deal of amusement. I laughed as well (which put him off a bit). He offered his opinion that there was probably a Women's Room somewhere else.

"I don't think so, Alan."

"I don't *think* so."



Viktor Davis reread the previous segment.

That just about sums it up, he thought. The Void and Artists. He reminded himself that he was endeavouring merely to make his points and he sincerely wanted to avoid belabouring them. He smiled to himself.

Fuck Art.

Let's dance some more.



The difference, of course, is one of perception. Which is more important (as an example): Sex, or Emotion? The Sixties were a Male Decade. Sex was everywhere. Emotion took a back seat. In my own case, if I could have a different woman every night of the week, I would do so. If I could have every woman I desired, but I could only have her once, I would do so. If the bargain required that I would never know the Joy of Merged Permanence, there would be no contest. You might as well ask me if I would rather have a nice Lemon Meringue Pie or bamboo shoots stuck under my fingernails. What is this, a trick question or something? I'll take Lemon Meringue Pies for five hundred, Alex.



In my view, it comes down to which you think is Paper Currency and which you think is Gold. To women, to the Emotional Female Void, their emotions, their feelings, are the Gold at the center of their economic system. Sex is the Paper Currency which represents one aspect of those emotions. To me Sex is the Gold, female emotions the valueless bits of paper interposed between myself and the treasure. As the Emotional Female Void has become preeminent in our age, men have been offered two choices: either perceive Emotion as Gold or do without the Paper Currency. Of course, for men, the proposition becomes: "Either acknowledge that Paper Currency is more valuable than Gold, or do without the Gold." The majority of men have capitulated happily. Yes, yes, Paper Currency is more valuable. Can I have some Gold now? The answer, of course, is no. Why do you want Paper Currency (Gold) when I'm offering you all of this Gold (Paper Currency)? Women in the context of Merged Permanence develop a profound jealousy of their own bodies. For most men, the great myth of Merged Permanence is that you will "get it whenever you want it". Over a period of time, this becomes adjusted to "getting it regularly". Inevitably, this declines into "getting it on the rare occasions when she'll let me have some". There have been many historical precedents for women withdrawing sexual favours in order to assert their Power. Today, it is a worldwide, firmly entrenched phenomenon. "Women Who Refuse to Have Sex With Their Husbands" is not a topic that you are going to see documented in the Void-dominated media; it certainly is not going to be the subject of a week-long series on *Oprah* or *Donahue*. I venture to say if you want to find the leading cause of Domestic Violence, the subject is worth a second look. It is an intrinsic part of the Emotional Void's nature to focus on Symptoms when examination of the Problem is what is called for.



Viktor Davis thumbed through the now-diminishing stack of papers. He finds himself drawn to several sheets of white notepaper torn from a small pad. "Coco Chanel", "Colleen Doran". He scans the ensuing sentence fragments quickly and then reviews them more carefully. "There are exceptions." The "are" is underlined several times.

"Sensibility is an altogether different matter from outward manifestation. In seeking to identify and characterise the Female Void, Viktor Davis was attempting to show his reader that there was a much larger game afoot. What appeared to be Male Dominance of the global village amounted to *pay no attention to the Wife and Kids behind the curtain*. In a genuine Patriarchy there would be no such thing as marriage. In point of fact, in a Patriarchy, Merged Permanence would probably be illegal in a contractual sense. The Wisdom of Fathers (contemplating the inevitability of the Male Heart and Groin compelling their owner to capitulate to a Devouring Emotional Void) would mandate that no monetary resources could be sacrificed on the altar of the Would-Be Venus."

This was followed by several false starts which were crossed out. Beneath these, Viktor Davis had written "get to the point".

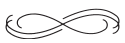
Indeed.

The point, of course, was that the Male Light was not the exclusive property of Men. It was very *close* to being the exclusive property of Men, but as Viktor Davis had reminded himself, "there are exceptions". In the case of self-publishing (Viktor Davis' idea of self-publishing was best summed up by Don Simpson's promotional slogan: "One Comic Book. One Universe. Why Pay More?"), there were the indisputable contributions of Colleen Doran and Teri Wood. The problem, of course, in acknowledging exceptions in the Female Void-Dominated Age, was that exception was always extrapolated into being a Universal Truth. This was the shaky foundation upon which Feminism was (and is) built. There were (and are) women who begin their sentences with "I believe..." or "I think..." And they *do* think. They have reasoned and coherent world views. They realise that inspiration is simply the starting point, that without dedication, hard work, and an avoidance of the Rapacious Voids which dominate our civilisation, the "hard, gem-like flame" becomes wavery or is extinguished. This sensibility occurs more often – *far* more often – in men than it does in women. This is not bigotry, this is not sexism, it is a fact which is supported by empirical evidence. The Brontë Sisters are not William Shakespeare, Madame Curie is not Albert Einstein, Florence Nightingale is not Louis Pasteur, Penny Marshall is not Orson Welles, Joan of Arc is not Jesus Christ.

The Male Light is not a genderless thing, but it occurs where it occurs and *sometimes* (not often) it occurs in women. Where the Male Light occurs, it must overcome all manner of adversity, not the least of which is the war between the Heart and the Mind. The mistake Feminism makes is in thinking (or, rather, *feeling*) that legislation can be passed to eliminate adversity and, in this, it has been quite successful, to the general detriment of our society. The Founders of Feminism, those with Good Brains and the ability to Reason and Contribute, in regarding the babbling cacophony of the "I feel..." brigade they have unleashed upon the world in the name of numerical parity in all areas of human endeavour, have much to reflect on. I doubt that they do (or will). But, I think that they should.

The Coco Chanel reference was to the founder and driving force of the French design house (to whom I referred allegorically in *Jaka's Story* when I introduced Lord Julius' fashionable young wife, Astoria, whose simple and elegant clothing had caused such a stir in Palnu's court, making all of the other Great Ladies' attire seem gaudy and tasteless). For the benefit of the male reader, I'll point out that Jackie's pink number in Dallas was a Chanel. Chanel, after Coco's death, has been taken over by men who are busily adding flourishes and accoutrements of all tasteless and gaudy shapes and sizes to the Chanel designs. The Seminal Light of her innovation is consumed by the Devouring Void of greed, expediency and fad.

There *are* exceptions.



Viktor Davis reread the passage about Patriarchy and sat staring out the window for some time. The balancing act in which he was engaged was a delicate one. In trying not to belabour his points, there was a real danger of passing over salient arguments too quickly. The Emotional Void relied almost exclusively on contradictory anecdotal evidence. "Not *all* women are like that; I have a friend who..." Overarching beliefs, large verities, universal truths were dismissed as generalisations. Viktor Davis stared out the window for several more minutes and then began typing.

"Men like Cars. Viktor Davis doesn't like Cars. Viktor Davis is a Man."

These observations were all true statements. Was it a syllogism? Or was there another name for it? Viktor Davis was uncertain. To the Reasoning Mind and to the Emotional Void, the fundamental structure was sound. They were all true statements, though they appeared contradictory. Using those three statements as a template, Viktor Davis had spent much of his adult

life attempting to Reason with the Female Emotional Void. In each case, whatever success he had had (and he had had very little success) had been temporary. He considered his lack of success to be central to the Issue at Hand. Within the context of the Female Emotional Void, no general observation could be considered sound if there existed an anecdotal refutation.

Birth and Death.

There is too much Birth in the world and there is not enough Death.

How can you say that? wails the Female Emotional Void. *Just the other day in the newspaper, 1 read about a family of four who were...*

"I'm not saying," interrupted Viktor Davis, "that people don't die. What I am saying is that there is not enough Death.

"I'm not saying," he added, "that babies don't make people ecstatically happy. I'm saying that there is too much Birth. Those are two very different things. If you could create a four-dimensional model consisting of two spheres, one representing Birth and the other representing Death, the former sphere, observed over the last four hundred years, would be growing larger and larger, faster and faster. The latter sphere would be growing smaller and smaller, faster and faster.

Our planet will double its population in the next ten years. Given that it is our society's collective Emotional Void Response that we are not overpopulated, my Reasoning Mind is moved to ask, when does overpopulation occur? If eight billion is not overpopulated, then what is? Fifteen billion? Eighty billion? One hundred billion?

I'm trying very hard to paint you the Big Picture. Patriarchy, to me, is a red herring, a false premise. Which is more successful, Birth or Death? I'm asking you to picture the two as Organisms. The individual, lower-case births and deaths which make up those two Organisms are like molecules. A molecule within an elephant is not an elephant. Birth is Female. Death is Male.

Which is more successful?

If you are unable to see what I'm saying, then I think that proves my point. The Emotional Void is winning. This is not a Patriarchy. It is a Matriarchy. If it ever was a Patriarchy, it was in a time and place where there was a balance between Death and Birth. You'd have to go back a long, long way to find a civilisation and an era where that was true.



"Oh, NO! *No* way. Uh-uh." Jeff Smith is shaking his head violently from side to side. He has lunged forward in his seat, his hands waving in the air, as if shooing away a large insect. All of his movements are agitated. At the other end of the couch, his wife sits, her feet tucked beneath her, calmly smoking a Marlboro Light. Her features are inscrutable. Viktor Davis takes another sip of his beer.

"You'd agree that Death is Male?" he asks.

"Yes."

"You'd agree that Birth is Female?"

"Yes. Which one is winning?"

"No. No, no way. It's just not true." He stares straight ahead for a moment or two and then looks at Viktor Davis. "I just don't think that way, man. I just can't see that at all."

Vijaya grinds out her cigarette in a small glass ashtray.

At Jeff's insistence, the discussion ends. They agree to disagree. Viktor Davis isn't certain what the disagreement is, but clearly an impasse has been reached.

They begin to discuss animation instead.



Viktor Davis had been through his pile of paper many, many times in the last two weeks or so. One of the newspaper clippings (from the *London Observer* in late 1993), sent to him by a *Cerebus* fan, had gone missing. It concerned the cleanup of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. It seemed that the average cost to rehabilitate the local wildlife had come to something on the order of $40,000 per seal. Two of the more expensive reclaimed subjects had been released back into the sea at a special ceremony. Inside of five minutes they were both eaten by a killer whale.

All stories are true. Was the story apocryphal? Possibly. Was the story a hoax? It could very well be. Whether the story happened or not, whether the cost of reclamation is exaggerated, at the core there is, to me, a great truth. Where Emotion supersedes Reason, where Compassion overrules Thought, you will end up spending thousands of dollars to clean up a killer whale's dinner for him. You will do many things that are equally absurdist in their nature. It is, to me, a centerpiece of the Female Emotional Void viewpoint that a seal covered in oil is seen only as a potential mummy seal or daddy seal or (come on, you can take it) someone's little boy seal or little girl seal. It is beyond the capacities of the Female Emotional Void to see the furry little creature as Whale Food.

A seal is dying.

Somewhere, right now, a furry little thing with big black puppy-dog eyes is being ground to pulp in the jaws of a killer whale. Blood is geysering from severed arteries, bones are splintering into needle-thin fragments. Somewhere else, a litter of seal pups suckles at its mother's teats.

The one is not a good thing and the other a bad thing. They are both necessary. Between the two, a balance is maintained. There are enough seals to eat the things that seals eat, and there are enough seals to feed the things that eat seals. You would do seals no favour by having the United Nations Security Council pass a resolution granting them a Seal Homeland, protected by a multinational peacekeeping force from killer whales. You would do the seals no favour by developing Seal Fertility Drugs and Surrogate Mother Seals for those seals unable to conceive on their own. Even if you managed, over a period of years, to airlift in a large enough supply of fish so that No Little Seal Would Go To Bed Hungry, the best that you could accomplish is an Exponentially Rising Seal Population. Soon, you would need an expanded peacekeeping force to keep the seals from killing each other, as well as keeping the killer whales at bay. The resources required to build adequate housing for the seals and to maintain an adequate supply of fish would double and redouble, faster and faster.



One of the acknowledged masters of the cartooning field, Winsor McCay, did a cartoon some decades ago depicting Death and Time. Death stands hunched over a long scroll, crossing off a name. Time is bearing away a coffin marked Old Age. The former says *He Was Too Old To Think* (emphasis mine). The latter replies *Yes. And He Encumbered The Earth.* The cartoon is entitled *Death Is Kind and Necessary.* The subheading is *It Wipes Off the Human Slate, Makes Way for New Ideas* (again, emphasis mine).



Life out of balance.

We are already past the point of no return. I think it is no coincidence that the last organized attempt in this century to institutionalize genocide (the Nazi Death Camps) constituted little more than a flesh wound inflicted by the Death Sphere upon the Birth Sphere. World War II ended with the dropping of two Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I don't, for one minute, deny the human suffering involved, the families and cultures which were decimated by the conflict. What I am saying is that We Have a Problem. We seem to be unable to confront the fact that Death has become impotent. Even if we applied all of the resources of technology to building Space Age Death Camps, even if we could arrive at a consensus of Who Has to Go (everyone with blue eyes, anyone over the age of twenty-five, anyone under six feet tall — using three examples which would include myself in the hopes that you can understand my point here), it would take several generations before we could even make a dent in the overwhelming advantage that Birth holds over Death.

Instead, we apply the enormous resources of the state of Michigan to stopping Jack Kevorkian from assisting terminally ill patients to commit suicide.

Life out of balance.

WAY out of balance.

WAY, WAY, WAY out of balance.

The Universal Mother, Birth, has an agenda. It is a very short agenda, consisting of two items: One, childbirth is an inherent right. Two, absolute safety for everyone is the goal of human society. On both counts, she is doing very, very well. In considering a worldwide population of eight billion people, the *relative* number of people who are dying in wars (or "wars", rather) is very, very small. The *relative* number of people who are dying from diseases is very, very small. The *relative* number of people who are dying from famine is very, very small.

The only answers to these points are Void Emotional, Void Anecdotal. "How would *you feel* if your family died in a war? How would *you feel* if a friend or relative of yours were dying of AIDS or leukemia? How would *you feel* if everyone in your neighbourhood were in the grip of a famine?" To me, these are not answers. The very underpinnings of the questions imply the Problem. It is Feeling, rather than Reason, which has brought us to this situation.

I'm pointing out to you that we are in the back seat of a car (ALL of us). There is no one in the driver's seat. As a matter of fact, the steering wheel fell off a few decades back. The accelerator is glued to the floor. The doors are welded shut. We are going faster and faster and faster. Take offence, if you will, at my impertinence in pointing this out. Call me heartless, a cold fish (believe me, I'm used to it). Ostracize me and form a worldwide *We're Just Out For a Sunday Drive in the Country* organization. Print up "Faster is Fun" posters. Hug and Kiss each other and Feel Good about yourselves. The Problem is Still There.

Here we go, eh?



The Universal Mother has most of the world's resources at her disposal. Childbirth is an inherent right, worldwide, with the exception of China. And even there, there is only a limit on childbirth, not an outright ban. China has managed to get its National Automobile to the point where it is only going way, way, way too fast, instead of way, way, way, WAY too fast. The news media are divided between two kinds of stories: Feel-Good stories and Feel-Bad stories. The implications of Feel-Bad stories are self-evident. It is a Dangerous World. It is unsafe to go to the corner store, unsafe to be out at night, unsafe to get into your car, unsafe to leave your baby unattended, unsafe to get in an airplane, unsafe to go to school, unsafe to jog, unsafe to sit in your living room, unsafe to leave your door unlocked, unsafe to go into the parking garage, unsafe to get in an elevator. Your neighbour is unsafe, your husband or boyfriend is unsafe, sex is unsafe, Tylenol is unsafe, Pepsi is unsafe, the streets are unsafe, downtown is unsafe, the suburbs are unsafe, being alone is unsafe, having a gun is unsafe, not having a gun is unsafe, swimming pools are unsafe, parks are unsafe, the subway is unsafe.

The Emotional Void is in full control and playing Emotional Tricks on itself. On television, it scares itself shitless and then sells itself material possessions. "It seemed okay. After all, she had known him for years. He was a friend, a schoolmate. She got into the car at 9:42 PM. And that was when the nightmare began." Pregnant pause. "When we come back, a mother remembers."

"Do you ever get a headache that just won't go away?"

At 9:42 that night, all around the world, girls were getting into cars with men that they knew. Millions of them. Billions of them. They went out for a soda. They stopped by and visited some friends. They did some research at the library. They went to band practice. They returned home and tried a new hairstyle. They talked on the phone to their girlfriend for about an hour-and-a-half. They did their homework. They went to bed. The end.

The odds of being at the center of a Celebrated Crime of Violence are about the same as winning a National Lottery. Losers and Winners. If, instead of focusing on each excruciating detail, a moment-by-moment reenactment of a Celebrated Crime of Violence, we followed a Lottery winner, moment by moment, reenacting His or Her Last Day as a Poor Person, the last half-hour before the winning number was announced, eyewitness accounts from everyone who was In The Room, we would be telling ourselves exactly what we are telling ourselves with *A Current Affair*, *Hard Copy* and all the rest of them. Nothing. Zip. Nada. This thing happened to this person. Implicit in this is not just "it *could* happen to you". It is fundamentally important for the Female Emotional Void, central to her advocacy of Merged Permanence, that the message be "it is *likely* to happen to you, it is practically *inevitable* that it will happen to you". Find a nice guy, settle down, have kids. Don't take any chances. Don't look for trouble and trouble won't look for you. "I'm bored" has become the universal refrain. Put on *A Current Affair*. See that girl? Just an ordinary, fun-loving seventeen-year-old, just like you. She was probably "bored" too, don't you think? And now look – look at her mother crying, look at the shocked expressions of disbelief on the faces of her classmates. Look at her favourite teacher choking back his tears. You're "bored"? Count yourself lucky, Missy. That girl probably wishes she were "bored" right now. But it's too late for her. She just had to go out and have "fun", didn't she?



Fear. Our Merged Female Emotional Void Heritage is nearly universal. We are being made afraid of everything. Bad things do happen. Bad things happen to everyone. When was the last time a Bad Thing happened to you? Not a bad thing; a Bad Thing? The best part about Fear as Lifestyle is that you will eventually be proven right. It may take a few weeks, it may take a year, five years, ten years, but if you face each day Numb with the Certainty that Something Bad is Going to Happen, it eventually will. I knew it. I just knew something Bad was going to happen today.

A Coward dies a Thousand Deaths; the Hero dies but Once.

I agree with that sentiment, except for the "Hero" part. I'd replace that with "the Thinking Person".



People have been known to spontaneously combust. It *does* happen. The difference between people who wear only flame-retardant clothing and carry a fire extinguisher with them wherever they go and the manner in which the majority of our population conducts its day-to-day affairs is one of degree only.



During the great polio epidemics of this century, whole neighbourhoods were scrubbed clean. Pesticides were sprayed on every tree, every inch of lawn. Whole communities mobilized in a concerted effort to eliminate any likely or even remotely possible source for the pestilence. When the polio vaccine was discovered, it was found that the source of the disease was a bacteria found in raw sewage, to which humans had previously been immune because they used to be exposed to it in trace amounts over extended periods.

No! Bad! That's dirty!

DIR-TEE!



"Checkmate," said Viktor Davis.

He smiled and lit another cigarette.

No, not you.

Me.

I'm looking at the biggest chessboard it is possible for me to imagine. My side is Reason. Your side is Emotion. I can't move my king. Here are the news media and popular culture, scampering wildly in the direction of the latest example of Anecdotal Human Misery, cameras bobbing, microphones thrust before the latest Suspect. Did you do it? How do you Feel? The Victim's family. Do you think he did it? How do you Feel?

Check.

Here is the Absolute Right to Give Birth. Babies having babies. The human population doubling and redoubling. It reminds me of the story of the commoner who did a great favour for a King and was granted a boon. He asked only that the King put one piece of grain on the first square of his chessboard, two grains on the second square, four grains on the third square, eight grains on the fourth square and so on. By the time the thirtieth square had been filled, the King's granaries had been emptied. By the time the fortieth square had been filled, the King owed the commoner all the wheat his kingdom could produce for the next ten years. *All stories are true.*

Check.

Here are all of the mechanisms for changing direction, occupied by televised portrayals of Husbands and Fathers. No legislation can be passed which jeopardizes the Absolute Right to Give Birth. Every child must be fed. Three square meals a day. Clothing. Shelter. Mothers' Allowances. Ninety-eight percent of Child Support is paid by men to women.

Check.
Reason can't defeat Emotion in an argument because in an Emotional Argument you just go around and around in rhetorical circles until you become Happy again and then the argument's over.

Check.

Mate.



Merged Permanence, the Emotional Female Void, surveyed the board uneasily. The Universal Maternal Visage brightened.

What about...?

The Brightness vanished.

Oh. Right.

Viktor Davis took another drag from his cigarette. There was a great serenity in his level gaze.

Maybe you could move your...

The two were silent for a time. Viktor Davis calmly smoked his cigarette. The Emotional Female Void looked up at him and flashed a friendly smile which Viktor Davis did not return. The Emotional Female Void returned to studying the situation on the board. The corners of Her mouth twisted downwards, frustration and misery etching long, hard lines in Her features. Tears started from Her eyes.

Without looking up, she asked:

What should I do?

Viktor Davis continued to smoke, drawing out the moment, increasing the tension in the air. At last he said:

"*You* won." And then he added, "*you* tell *me*."



Viktor Davis pushed back from the chessboard. He stood up and took a last drag from his cigarette. He expelled the smoke in a small series of concentric rings. He reached across the board and lightly flicked his cigarette. Swirling ashes fell like the first winter snow on his opponent's queen, catching here and there in her crown and in the moulded curves of her majestic form, settling onto the black square she occupied and the white and black squares adjacent to her.

He turned and walked towards the door.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

It was the plaintive cry of a wounded animal, a frightened child lost in the woods.

WHAT SHOULD I

Viktor Davis closed the door behind him, cutting off the piercing crescendo of the Voice which was breaking, overtaken and consumed by Emotion, which the Voice was incapable of restraining, before which the Voice was as helpless as a sapling in a tornado.



Viktor Davis sat forward on his chair. His hands were folded together, resting against the lower half of his face, his elbows on his knees.

Exception entered the room.

You're very young, *Viktor Davis thought to himself, but said nothing. There was a kind of concern on Exception's face, but it consisted more of observation and assessment than it did of empathy or emotion. Beneath that cosmetic surface, strange imagery swam, fragments of ideas and intuitions, creative seedlings which might take root, might one day come to something. Or might not.*

"*You okay?" asked Exception.*

Viktor Davis briefly considered answering "Define okay," *simply for the literary effect. Fortunately, the time for literary effects was past.*

"*I'm fine," he said. "How are you doing?"*

"Good," replied Exception. "I have an idea for a..."

A passing ambulance or police car or fire engine drowned out the rest of the words. Story? Song? Play? Painting? Animated cartoon?

"That's good," said Viktor Davis, smiling.

"You never explained why men have beards," said Exception.

Viktor Davis laughed. He was quiet for a time and then he reached for his cigarettes.

"*We bit off her dick," he said. "That's why we have more of It than she does. More violence, more creativity, more Light. A man's beard can be summed up as 'Pay No Attention to the Seminal Act of Extreme Violence Behind the Curtain'." How many menstrual cramps does it take to paint the* Mona Lisa*?*

Exception considered this. "That's pretty far-fetched," Exception said.

Viktor Davis smiled. "If you'll recall, I said I think I know why men have beards and women don't. I didn't say I knew for sure."

"*All stories are true," said Exception.*

Viktor Davis nodded. "Even a story that says all stories are false is true."

"*What was all that stuff about Scheherezade and the Sword of Damocles about?"*



Viktor Davis smiled.

Most of what I've been saying here, I think you'll agree, is pretty controversial stuff. If you consider it controversial now, you can imagine what it was like carrying it around with you through John Lennon's murder, eight years of Ronald Reagan, four years of George Bush, the Gulf War, the murder of fourteen female engineering students by Marc Lepine in Montreal, Lorena Bobbitt, Janet Reno authorizing the assault on David Koresh's little Waco shindig.

I really do see it as a series of chessboards. Most things that happen in our world don't really change much on the chessboards. The news stories that go away in a hurry, like Tonya Harding, might represent the movement of a pawn on the next chessboard up. Something like JFK's assassination represents a simultaneous movement of several pieces which go a long way up and out to the Big, Bigger, Biggest chessboards. When I put Margaret Thatcher in the book and she was forced to resign by her male cabinet a few months later, well, when you're someone like me who believes in synchronicity, who is not intellectually equipped to explain something away as a coincidence, that can be a pretty unsettling experience. The worst part was that I knew I was still four or five years away from Getting to the Point. Was I playing on the same chessboard as Margaret Thatcher? Did I just knock off her queen? And how was that going to go over with the queen on the next chessboard up? It's tough to play a game when you don't know what board you're on or what the rules are. Thatcher's resignation was followed by an amazing series of Behind Closed Doors scandals, much bigger fish than myself crushed by the Sexual Harassment Juggernaut. They changed the laws in Canada so that a woman couldn't give her consent when she was drunk and a man couldn't plead innocent because of drunkenness. I seriously considered turning myself in. "Look, I don't remember what her name was, but she was a nurse at Freeport Hospital. She was drunk and I was drunk. As a law-abiding, public-spirited citizen, I want to turn myself in." I probably would have, but, really, all I could do was keep going. The only real card I had to play was knowing that the Point, the Point that would get me in the most trouble with the Female Emotional Void, was in issue numbers 181 to 186, not 287 to 300. That's why I'm writing this in June instead of August, as I ordinarily would be for a September release. It was the Run for the Roses. Maybe I could catch Her sleeping or something.

Viktor Davis laughed.

And then I'm getting ready to go out one Friday night and I just happen to turn on the television and there's O.J. Simpson and his buddy on a nice little 40-mile-an-hour jaunt down the 405, with a dozen police cars

following them. I could definitely relate.

Exception laughed. "So you made it?"

Viktor Davis grinned. "To quote a great philosopher of modern times, 'It Ain't Over 'Til It's Over.' Cerebus *is a very weird little commodity in the context of the Female Emotional Void Age. It's too small to pay attention to and too big to ignore. Issue #184 hasn't even come out yet. The collected* Reads *won't be out for almost a year and that's where most people read the book: in the collected form. It wouldn't be that big a stretch to categorize* Reads *as Hate Literature against women. All it would take is for one woman to be disturbed enough by* Reads *to file a lawsuit, or a women's group to file a class-action suit, in this Fascistic Feminist country and that would be the ballgame, wouldn't it?"*

"*Does that worry you?"*

"*Not especially. They could ban the book, seize the house and all of the inventory, all of the artwork, and burn it. Copies of it would still be out there. As long as I can have a pad of paper and a ball-point pen in my prison cell, I'll be happier than a pig in shit. Clean and sober, three square meals a day, an exercise room to work out in. No monthly deadline. Sounds like a lot less pressure to me."*



Viktor Davis grew serious.

"*Don't ever be afraid," he said. "FDR was right. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. I might get to the end of* Cerebus *and I might not. I could get hit by a bus, I could get cancer, 1 could lose my right hand, my eyesight, I could fall in love and get married."*

Exception was unable to conceal profound astonishment.

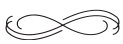
Viktor Davis laughed. "I'm not immune, you know. All of those things have happened to better men than me. If you look at the casualty figures in any creative field, the odds are pretty good that I'll die in poverty, the work itself completely forgotten. The other option, if you're talking about house odds, is that I end up married to some tyrannical Queen of the Circus. Love is blind. It's also deaf, dumb and stupid. If What's-Her-Boobs can do that to Hugh Hefner, what we are talking about is a very large and very determined Force of Nature. You can walk as carefully as you want through a minefield; it is still a minefield. But it's also true that if you step up to the plate worrying that you're going to strike out, the odds are that you're going to strike out. Not doing a large ambitious work because you're convinced that Danger Lurks Around Every Corner, the old 'I might be dead this time next year' is a waste of the Inner Radiance that found you. It's like life insurance. It's betting against yourself. It's blowing out your own flame before someone beats you to it."



Night had fallen and Viktor Davis seemed to become less substantial, seemed to merge with the surrounding darkness. Only the edges of his features were clear, illuminated as he was from behind.



Remember that you're just a custodian for It. You can be a good custodian, a so-so custodian or a bad custodian. You can make It a pile of smouldering twigs or you can make It a bonfire. The Male Light or the Female Void. I'm telling you that you have to choose. I'm telling you that if you think you can have both, you are mistaken, that you have already made your choice in that case.



Was Exception growing or was Viktor Davis shrinking?



"You're getting larger," said Viktor Davis. "We're going our separate ways. A six-inch-by-nine-inch image area is a very cramped environment. You're not in here anymore. You're out there. And I'm just the voice in your head. Back to the way it used to be."

He smiled.

"*Well, not quite the way it used to be."*

Victor Davis did not elaborate.



Consensus and Exception merged once more. Rather, Consensus and some Exceptions merged. Other Exceptions, feeling the first icy brush of the Merged Void against them, edged slightly apart from it. As they felt the weak gravitational tug, they moved even farther from it, compressing their own awareness within themselves. Several hard, gem-like flames flared into new existence.



"Shine on,
You Crazy Diamond."
Pink Floyd
"Wish You Were Here"

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4,500 WORDS ON THE RESTORED *READS*

Sean Michael Robinson

Publishing had been considered, like the wine trade, an occupation permissible for gentlemen, perhaps from the fallacy that the most necessary qualification was an appreciation of literature. In fact, then as now, a publisher, to achieve success, needed charm, financial acumen, fore-knowledge of the future, a stony heart, and a very rich wife.

—Ruari McLean, *Victorian Book Design & Colour Printing*

In his introduction to *Reads,* Dave Sim refers to this, the ninth book of the *Cerebus* series, as "a point of convergence and a breaking apart of the *Cerebus* readership." With the distance of two decades as of this writing, I'd say this is both prescient and something of an understatement. In the text pages that populate the second half of the book, *Reads* fractures the fictional narrative of the story and, for many readers, represent the termination of their association with the greater work, *Cerebus* as a whole.

The critical reaction was as aggressive as it was shallow.

Do you really need me to summarize *Reads?* I'm betting you've read it—or skimmed it, let's say—at least once. And Sim does an excellent job summarizing it in his introduction to the book, and hinting at the ways in which it functions in the broader story.

Above, I invoked the word "critical," maybe a little carelessly. I think there's a distinction to be made between *criticism*, and *critical words*; of the latter, there's been plenty addressing *Reads*. The former, I don't think I've seen. What, exactly, do the different sections of *Reads* have to do with each other? How does a story about a writer navigating the corrupt and corrupting world of publishing fit in with the rising climax of an almost 3,000 page visual sword and sorcery epic? And how to explain the almost-but-not-quite-autobiographical broadside that makes up the text portions of the back of the book? How do the formal aspects of the work function (or not) in conjunction with (or not) the narrative aspects of the text?

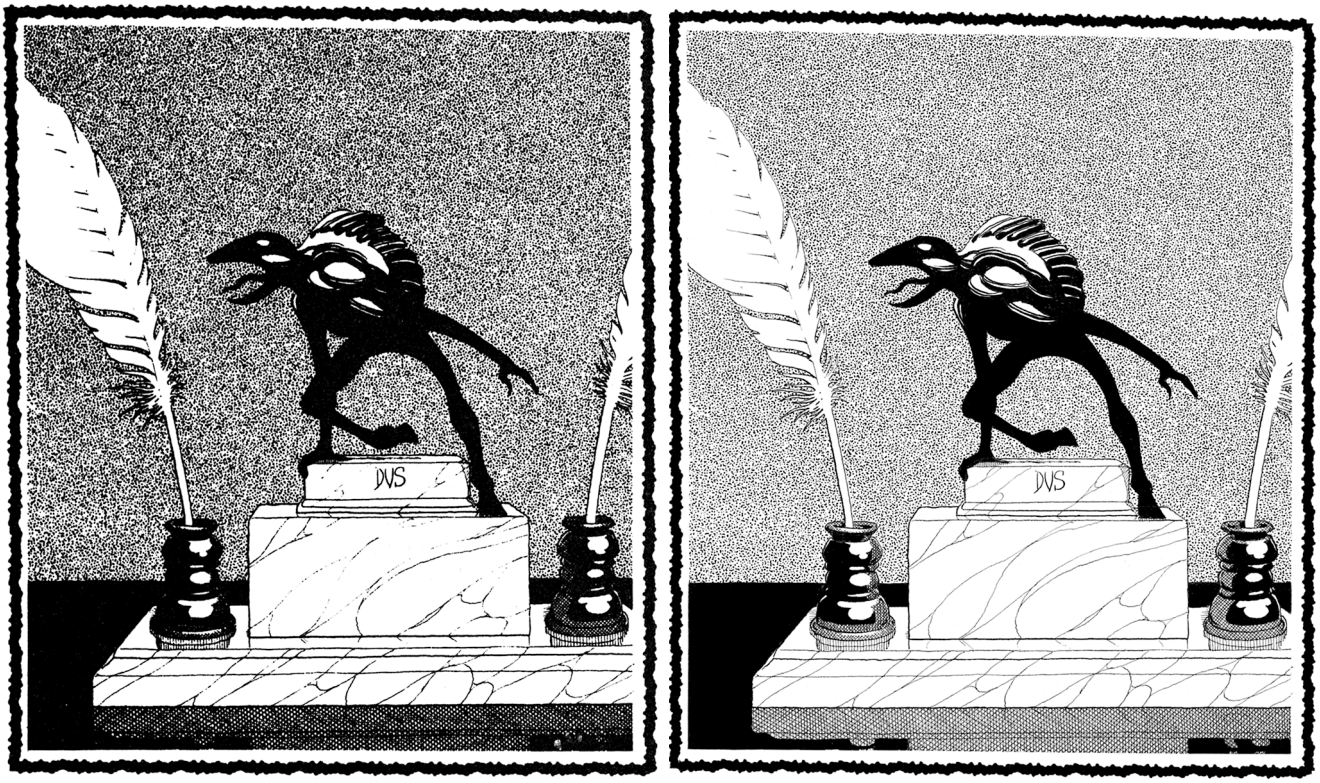
What, you're not expecting an explanation from me, are you?

[Barry Windsor-Smith] had prints of all his Gorblimey work there, and, for whatever reasons, began to describe the allegory behind the Ram & Peacock prints [...] we all stood, mouths agape, while Barry unraveled, in meticulous detail, the interlocking representations and juxtapositions, the story he intended to tell with the picture and the grand joke that it would sell on the basis of the barbarian in the picture when the barbarian was incidental to the intent of it.

His explanation triggered off a way of looking at creativity, for me, that continues to this day. I began striving to understand the myriad levels of meaning in all great and intended-to-be-great works of art. When I failed at that — became discouraged because I couldn't read each artist's mind, I began to see that what was intended was not nearly as important as what I perceived — I now looked at works for their impact on me, no longer for whatever "right interpretation" might theoretically exist.

—Dave Sim, *Swords of Cerebus*, 1983

Throughout the *Cerebus* series, the literal narrative, i.e. the who-did-what, is inseparable from the form and formal experimentation of the work itself. This is nowhere more true than *Reads*. In the 174 monthly issues leading up to *Reads*, Sim had perused, poked, pushed, and prodded the formal boundaries that have served to separate the graphic narrative (parentage uncertain, most probably born to one Rodolphe Töpffer in 1831) from the novel (born a century or three earlier, but come of age around the same time). *High Society,* the second volume of *Cerebus,* uses diagetic "found texts" (transcripts, diaries, letters, a written history) to move the story forward and compress the action while enriching and enlarging the unvisited portions of the fictional world. *Church & State* introduces the "read", Estarcion's equivalent to the pamphlet-novel, and early chapters follow Cerebus's own attempts at composition (mostly used to humorous effect), and further use of transcripts, letters and notes, as well as a mercifully brief excerpt from *The Prime Minister and the Hussy— A Tale of the Tainted Love That Destroyed a City-State.* Later on, in a chapter consisting solely of full-page double spreads, a seemingly non-diagetic text appears *("The Sudden Return of the Melodramatic Narrator,"* Cerebus 102*);* prose that narrates the interior thoughts of the disparate characters, all witnessing a single miraculous event— the



growth of the black tower, and Cerebus's ascension to the heavens. The following book, *Jaka's Story,* takes the conjunction of those dissonant reading modes and brings it to another level of intensity. The narrative contained in the comics pages is the most interior, reflective story of the book, a quiet story addressing the characters and their interactions, but allowing the reader to observe at a distance. We watch Jaka clean the apartment. We see her looking out the window of the tavern, waiting for customers to appear, see the tavern owner Pud in turn watching her. We observe as Jaka and her husband Rick orbit each other, navigate their own needs and their imaginings of the future. The prose, when it appears, takes two distinct forms. One—the slowly-shifting interior monologue of Pud, the mama's boy who has found Jaka and will do anything for her to stay. Two — a narrative of the early life of Jaka, as told in stylized prose and accompanied by inset illustrations and floral majuscules. In short, the graphic novel is punctuated by features that in any other context would be considered a heavily illustrated novel. In *Flight,* the first two books of the four book cycle *Mothers and Daughters,* multiple prose voices return from previous book in the series—most relevant here, the interior dialogue of Cerebus and Suenteus Poe, transcripts of conversations had by Cirin and those in her proximity, and the Melodramatic Narrator, who arrives in time to narrate and explicate the spiritual dimension of the otherwise inexplicable events happening simultaneously all around Iest. *Mothers and Daughters* continues in *Women,* which begins with blocks of text facing off both ideologically and typographically: quotes from Astoria's *Kevillist Origins* and Cirin's *The New Matriarchy.* With the events of the series reaching a frenzied climactic pitch, we arrive at *Reads*, and come to a standstill.

Reads takes the reflective tone of *Jaka's Story,* the unusual effect generated by switching reading modes between prose and quiet comic, and amplifies this effect yet again, by separating out these two modes of reading/thinking into multiple distinct but resonant narratives, suggesting relation without making said relationship explicit. In *Jaka's Story* the text pages function as a high-contrast counterpoint to the quiet domestic drama unfolding in the comics pages—here they stand by themselves, bringing the rising-action anticipation of climax of the previous book to a grinding halt, and forcing consideration—what exactly is so important in these pages?

You want me to say "four," I'll say "four"—you want me to say "seven", I'll say "seven"—only please don't take my townhouse.

— Victor Reid*, Reads*

The first portion of the text follows the success and subsequent downfall of Victor Reid, author. He has been "labouring in virtual obscurity on a series of historical fictions centered on the interwoven relationship of Cirinism and Kevillism," for a period of "some years (sixteen, to be precise)", before unexpected and unwanted fortune—success—strikes him. In these first few paragraphs we are presented with what are, depending on your viewpoint, either direct references or allegorical resonances between Victor Reid and one Dave Sim, author; the most relevant to the current discussion, the sixteen year span between the publication of *Cerebus # 1*

(December 1977) and the Image Comics publication of *Spawn #10* (May 1993).

Written by Dave Sim and drawn by Spawn's creator, Todd McFarlane, this one-off issue was published by Image Comics, at the time a new upstart publisher in the world of capes and tights. Image Comics promised full creative ownership to its creators, during a brief period of public hand-wringing over the way previous generations of comics creators were dying, impoverished and underacknowledged, while their creations generated unprecedented levels of cash for the publishers that controlled them. Given a one-issue guest writer slot on *Spawn #10,* it was this very topic that Sim chose to address, albeit allegorically. The North American comics industry was in the midst of a multi-year speculative bubble the likes of which had never been seen. Like most Image comics at the time, massive amounts of the issue were sold—unlike most others, it was thought-provoking, coherent, and acid. The most memorable images from the issue—a cave filled with, on one side, a row of hooded and bound men, on the other side, their superheroic creations, behind bars, pleading for release. The demon opponent of Spawn, the Violator, dressed as blind justice, wearing a gown of money. (A photograph of *Flaming Carrot* letterer Roxanne Starr dressed up as the latter image would later appear on the back cover of *Cerebus* 179, alongside the following Victor Reid quote: "Once I'm financially secure, I can write exactly what I want to write about without having to worry if it sells or not.")

In the brief period of time between the founding of Image Comics and the subsequent publication of *Spawn #10*, it was clear to those who cared that these Image folks were more of the same. Half of the Image founders fell over each other in a desperate scramble to see who could create the biggest pile of computer-colored product in the shortest period of time, assembling a demolition derby of scrawlers to bring their every cocktail napkin superhero doodle to life.

This is the backdrop for the text portions of the first half of *Reads*—an industry run amok, flush with cash from expansion into toys, cards, television, underwear, ancillary properties out the wazoo, creators themselves only obstacles to The Product. *Spawn #10* takes the form of the genre for which it was written, its damning indictment of the industry playing out as a literal battle, with fire, explosions, and death, told almost entirely in splash pages. The first half of *Reads,* however, is instead a transposition, picking over the details of the early 1990's comics glut and overlaying the world of serial novel publishing. The effect is an uncanny one, suggesting that the problems of one time and one "creative" industry are in fact problems inherent in any publishing relationship. Or any relationship?

The first portion of *Reads* hammers home the many ways in which corporate consensus constrains and controls creativity. Victor Reid, a once-promising writer, throws away his gifts in pursuit of the success which had up until this time eluded him. Unlike the excesses of his drinking, which take a physical rather than psychic toll, his excess desire for success, and the trappings that come with that success, damn him, in the end, to be a wasted talent, a shell of his former self, producing self-parody in order to keep his head above the encircling flood of debt.

The narrative is populated by references to various figures of comics publishing in the 1980s and 1990s, all which pursue Victor during his breakout success and drop him at his time of need. The point of all of this is hardly subtext. Victor Reid is undone by his own desires for wealth and fame and comfort, and his willingness to conform his own vision (and that of his researcher and collaborator Mileau) to fit the needs of the publisher. It's these differences that make it clear that, rather than being an autobiographical analysis of Sim's relationship to the industry, the Victor Reid portion of *Reads* is a moral text of another, broader sort, a meditation on creativity, on singularity, on the many ways in which a creator distances themselves off from the wellspring of their own creativity.

(Victor's intended subject matter? The ascension of Cerebus, the very event witnessed in "The Sudden Return of the Melodramatic Narrator." The very event that is repeated, revelations inverted, in the latter half of *Reads.*)





"The best way to counteract the 'penny dreadful' is to provide an equally attractive substitute, and the teachers might do a great deal by seeing that the young folk should have access to a good supply of healthy fiction. It may be that the teachers themselves will have to be taught first, if it is true, as I have seen it stated, that the pupil-teachers, as well as the boys in the higher standards, buy 'penny dreadfuls' and exchange them with one another. If that is so, the pupil-teachers betray a craving for fiction which had better be satisfied with what is healthy than with what is unhealthy."

—*"How to Counteract the Penny-Dreadful,"* The Review of Reviews, 1895

What exactly are you missing coming to *Reads* as a collected volume? For one, the striking covers, each presented as the cover of a "read," in the style established by Sim back in the early chapters of *Church & State*—repeating interlocking glyphs, with inset illustrations and chapter titles. In several cases these illustrations, and the physical divisions they impose between chapters, clarify the thematic resonances between the different strands of text contained within. *Cerebus* 182. "EYES," the title proclaims, above a close-up of a multi-peepered creature. The interior of the comic, corresponding to pages 147 through 166 of the current volume, begins with the Roach's explosion of vision, continues with Cerebus and Cirin's silent slow-motion fight, in which Cerebus is struck in the head, temporarily loses his balance and sight, and finally, is mutilated by sword. At the terminus, Viktor Davis and Alan Moore, culminating in Davis's direct address of the reader. Viktor Davis: "It would never occur to me, sitting at an Eric Clapton concert, to wonder if Eric Clapton thought he was better than me. Eric Clapton is on the stage. I'm in the audience. What more is there to say? For any creativity of any kind, there are as many audiences as there are observers. Audiences. Always plural."

What else are you missing? For Dave Sim, in 1994, self-publishing wasn't just a living for himself and Gerhard. It wasn't just a means of self-expression. It wasn't just the only way to ensure that he could write and draw and even think the things that interested him. It was a moral crusade. Mammoth tours. Interviews and other press encounters. Addresses to retailers. Self-publishing and cartooning how-to's, featured every month in the "Note from the President" editorial at the front of the book. Promotion of other self-published cartoonists both in the letter column and as "Cerebus Preview"s in the rear of the book. Support of all kinds to other creators. Private letters to younger creators, tracing paper corrections or notes on their work. The structure of the direct market gave Sim access to the twenty thousand (or so) readers that made up his audience(s) at this point in the series, an audience which made the unprecedented levels of self-expression and creative freedom he enjoyed possible; he returned the favor in every way he could, made it clear to other cartoonists how to go about cultivating their own audiences. It's this crusade that is at the heart of the first section of the book, and it's self-publishing that makes such an abrupt fictional departure even possible.

Dave,
When they first made love, it transcended any feeling, any emotion that she had ever felt before. They had both waited so long, holding back from this eventuality for the past few weeks they'd been fighting against it—trying to keep each to themselves—the fears of past rejections still clouding their memories, and it was only now that those fears slowly melted into a soft hesitancy…

—Nephelia, *Aardvark Comment* letter column, October 1993

Dear Dave,
The happy ending in my other letter was a bit premature. Not longer than 2 days after I wrote that letter did I see the error of my optimistic ways. She really started to annoy me.

—"ZOBNEK", *Aardvark Comment* letter column, May 1994

Dear Dave,
I've been staring at this damn logic proof for hours now, with no progress, and a new friend just rang, which completely blew my concentration, so I'm hoping to clear my head a bit by responding to Dean Esmay's letter in 177, which I passed from doing in that postcard ...

—Mikel Norwitz, *Aardvark Comment* letter column, May 1994

What else are you missing?

Viktor Davis's direct address of the reader in the latter half of *Reads* doesn't seem so shocking when you consider that Dave Sim had been carrying on and facilitating a dialogue (or many dialogues) between himself and his readers for more than a decade, in the letters column of the book. Readers wrote with questions about Sim's creative process, questions about relationships, thoughts about their lives, their dates, their "dates", their fantasies. Addressed to Sim, to Gerhard, to other readers. In that sense, Viktor Davis's appearance isn't so much of a breaking of the fictional world as a bleeding of one segment of the monthly book to another. The fissures created in the world of Estarcion by the meeting of the three aardvarks and the second ascension (BANG BANG BANG) allow the author and the audience to seep in; to, as it were, fill the void.

Am I giving too much away here? Am I inventing?

Lou, there are two kinds of people in this world. There are men, and there are women. You with me so far, big fella?
—Ted Baxter, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, "Lou's First Date," written by Ed. Weinberger and Stan Daniels, 1973

Conventional definitions aside ("I know it when I see it"), what makes a comic a comic? What makes a novel a novel? Is a work disqualified for having too many words? Too few? Too few drawings? Too many? Is *Little Dorrit* a work of graphic literature, produced in collaboration by Charles Dickens and Hablot K. Browne? Or is it a prose novel, entangled with some inconvenient cultural leavings? When a modern editor puts out an edition of *Vanity Fair* sans author W.M. Thackeray's own illustrations, several of which completely shift the meaning of the text, what exactly is being said by that decision? Who is the author of the resulting book? Was Richard Scarry a writer? How about Edward Gorey?

So until tomorrow, this is Sue Anne Nivens, your Happy Homemaker, saying, "God couldn't be everywhere. So he made mothers."
—Sue Anne Nivens, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, "The Dinner Party," written by Ed.Weinberger,1973

That latter half. Viktor Davis= David Victor Sim? It's the barest of fig leaves. Is *Cerebus* a work of fiction, a work of fantasy? Are the Cirinists an extrapolation of what a telepathic matriarchy might look like in an early industrial world filled with miracles? Or do you believe, as Viktor Davis seems to, that Cirinism and Kelvillism are direct representations of the state of our current world and culture?

Dave Sim, Capital D, Capital S, does show up in the next book, *Minds*, but when he does, he doesn't particularly resemble Viktor Davis. He's more Windsor McKay feeding an apple to Gertie the Dinosaur; the showman, the magician. The sequence in *Minds* of Cerebus's interrogation of his creator is complex and, to this reader anyway, thrilling. But Viktor Davis? Why is he here? And where does he get off telling me how to read his book? What reader, exactly, wants or expects the author to arrive to summarize, tell him what it all means?

That's a shallow reading. But I think that's a pretty fair assessment of a common reader reaction. Why? And, why?

When he fashioned a good evil in return for something noble, he led her out to where the other gods and men were,
her adorned in the garment the gray-eyed Daughter of a Mighty Father.
Wonder held immortal gods and mortal men, when they saw a sheer cunning, unmanageable for men.
For from her is the descent of female women
for the race and tribes of women are destructive, a great pain for mortals, living with men,
companions not of destructive Poverty but of Plenty.

—Hesiod, *Theogony,* 725 BCE

Is a film a film without the flickering light? Is a film a comic if you don't project it? If you printed the frames sequentially? Non-sequentially? Bound them together? Remove some? Drew some? If a personal essay appears as part of a comic book, does it become a comic book?

The Viktor Davis text takes the form of argument by analogy and analogy and analogy, over and over. If it were a pen-and-ink drawing it would be the most india-ink-encrusted illustration board to ever see service. I picture the interlocking tessera of the cover of a read, repeating shapes spilling out across the void. But instead of being filled with color, they're snaked with ink and China white, covered with every conceivable texture, suggesting surfaces heretofore unseen, ghostly gleaming structures, like the *carceri d'invenzione* of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, rising out of the smoky scrawl, all contained within/buried beneath the interlocking forms. Viktor Davis skips from subject to subject, circling the topic at hand, always another allusion, always a new resonance. It's a mode of thinking, a mode of telling, reminiscent of the future essay comics of Dave Sim, the projects he worked on after completing the mighty labor of *Cerebus*: *glamourpuss* and *The Strange Death of Alex Raymond*. Are they persuasive essays? Musings on craft and creation? The placing of powerful images and moments of time into the same field and observing the resulting vibration? All of the above?

This kind of "essay comic" is, as far as I know, *sui generis*, although if you'll permit me to cross media for the moment, it is reminiscent of the few completed "essay films" of Orson Welles, specifically *F For Fake. F For Fake* is a powerful and playful assemblage of documentary, polemic, magic, dissembling, and disassembling, weaving seamlessly between fact and fiction, between art, argument, and artifice. Like Sim, Welles was an autodidact of the highest order, a devour-er of knowledge and new fields of inquiry, a showman who made his name in narrative and in his later years chose to dissect the world with his abilities. Both men sometimes ran afoul of their audiences, when intent and expectation were on a path to collision.

I'm sure that Orson Welles would have had something to say to Victor Reid. Orson Welles, who arrived in Hollywood at age 24, having already conquered American theater and revolutionized radio, and was given the most creative freedom any film director had ever enjoyed. Orson Welles, a visual artist himself, who labored for months on scripts, drawings, test shots and effects for his first project, *Heart of Darkness:* who called film "the biggest electric trainset any boy ever had," shortly before his studio took that particular train away and put it in storage, never to be seen again. Orson Welles, whose first *completed* film, *Citizen Kane*, would have been destroyed, unreleased, had Welles himself not staged press showings and leveraged his celebrity to get coverage of the film and its impending destruction. Orson Welles, whose follow-up to *Kane* was gleefully mutilated by the studio that financed it, chopped and truncated and released into the world on a double bill with a vacuous action movie, the negatives for the "trimmings" either burned or used as road filler, the existing prints of the intact film never seen again. Orson Welles, who could have made a movie every three months for the rest of his life, but who instead never again had control of any film he didn't finance himself, who spent the rest of his career paying for his new ideas with the money he earned from acting in films written by committees and directed by lesser men.

Yeah. I think Welles would have plenty to say to Victor Reid.

"But…why?" the reader asked.

"Because I think it's time," said Viktor Davis. "Besides, I'm a storyteller. I think it's an effective story. I think it… explains a lot."

—Viktor Davis, Reads

Like the previously restored *Cerebus* volumes, *High Society* and *Church & State*, we've gone back to the source for this printing, creating new 2400 ppi digital masters of each page from the best available material, selected on a page-by-page basis. The majority of the comics pages were sourced from original art still in the hands of Sim or Gerhard, or in some cases, scanned by the page's current owners and submitted to us digitally. The remainder of the pages were sourced from photographic negatives originally used in the monthly production of the book, excepting four pages, which were restored from print copies instead. Each kind of material had its own challenges. In the case of the original art, the mechanical tone had shrunk somewhat in the twenty-odd years since these pages left the drawing boards. This was corrected as needed, digitally flying in tone from adjacent areas of the page. The photographic materials were gently cleaned with 98 percent pure isopropyl alcohol before being scanned and digitally adjusted and cleaned. The few pages sourced from earlier printings were cleaned digitally to ensure strong black reproduction and little generational loss. And lastly, the text portions were copy edited by Jeff Seiler (thank you, Jeff!), and reformatted to make fuller use of the page.

Unlike exclusively prose works, which can live on to be read and redistributed as long as there are books to copy, visual works intended for reproduction often have a narrow window of preservation. Physical materials degrade. Photographic negatives age and yellow, can be lost, can burn in a fire. But these digital files will live on as long as there are computers to access them. A deep bow and thank you to our patrons for making this process possible.

They put me in jail for my deviant ways
Two years seven months and sixteen days
Now I'm back on the street in a purple haze
Well I feel so good I'm gonna break somebody's heart tonight

—Richard Thompson, "I Feel So Good"

What thinking person expects art to exclusively reflect their own beliefs? Is there anything less interesting than conformation of creativity to convention? It's the secret thread that weaves between genre fiction and morality tracts, between romance novels and instruction manuals, that links editors to orthodoxies of all stripes.

It's the secret thread that binds *Reads* together.

Sean Michael Robinson
San Diego, CA
May 2016

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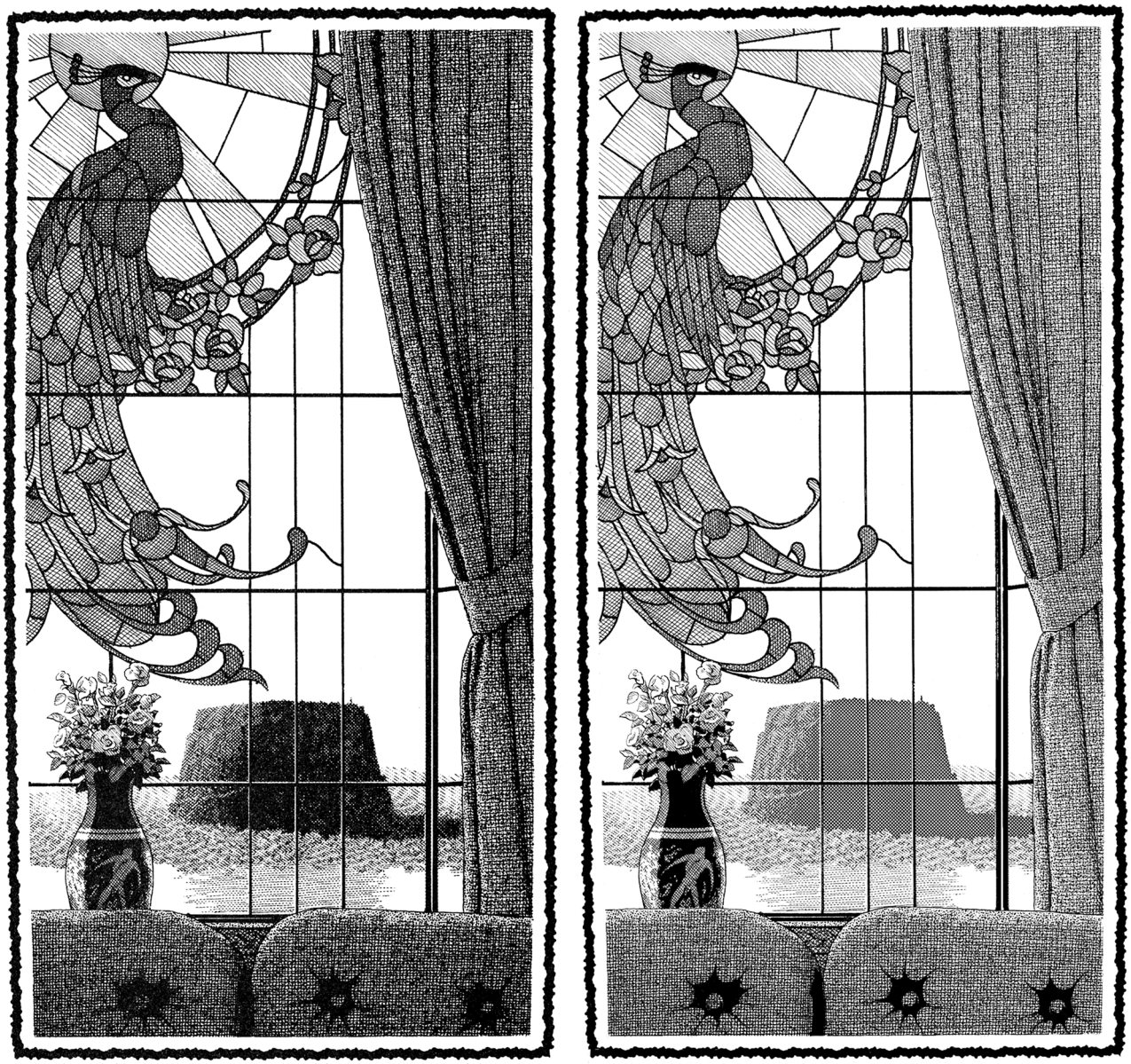
In preparing this new edition, we are indebted to the generous Cerebus art collectors who contributed scans of their artwork for this project. To contribute your own original artwork to the Cerebus Archive, please contact Sean at cerebusarthunt@gmail.com. Dave has created a finder's certificate that will be sent to every contributor for each page contributed to the art hunt, as well as to anyone sending a lead that results in the netting of a new page.

Justin Eisinger, IDW Publishing –
pg. 114 (Cerebus no. 180 pg. 08)

Dean Reeves –
pg. 122 (Cerebus no. 180 pg. 16)
pg. 169 (Cerebus no. 183 pg. 03)

Oystein Sorensen –
pg. 231 (Cerebus no. 186 pg. 05)

And special thanks to Tim F. for his continued patronage and support.



above left: Issue 176 page 7, scanned from a print copy of the issue.
above right: the same image, scanned directly from the original art board.

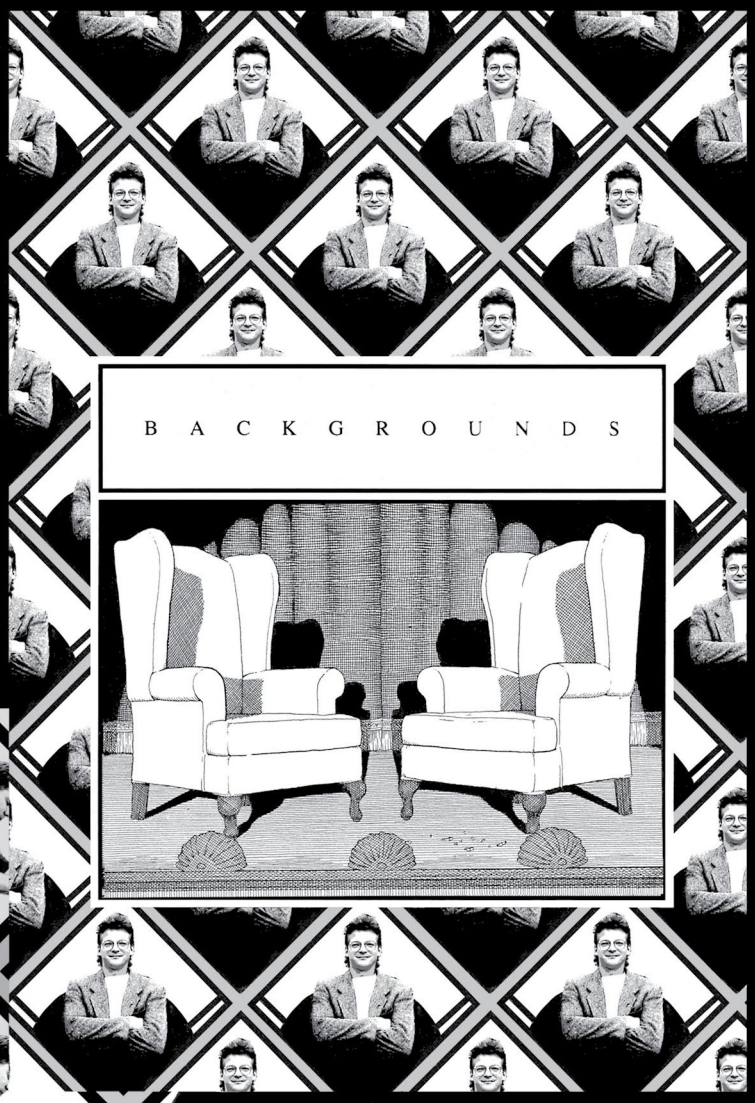
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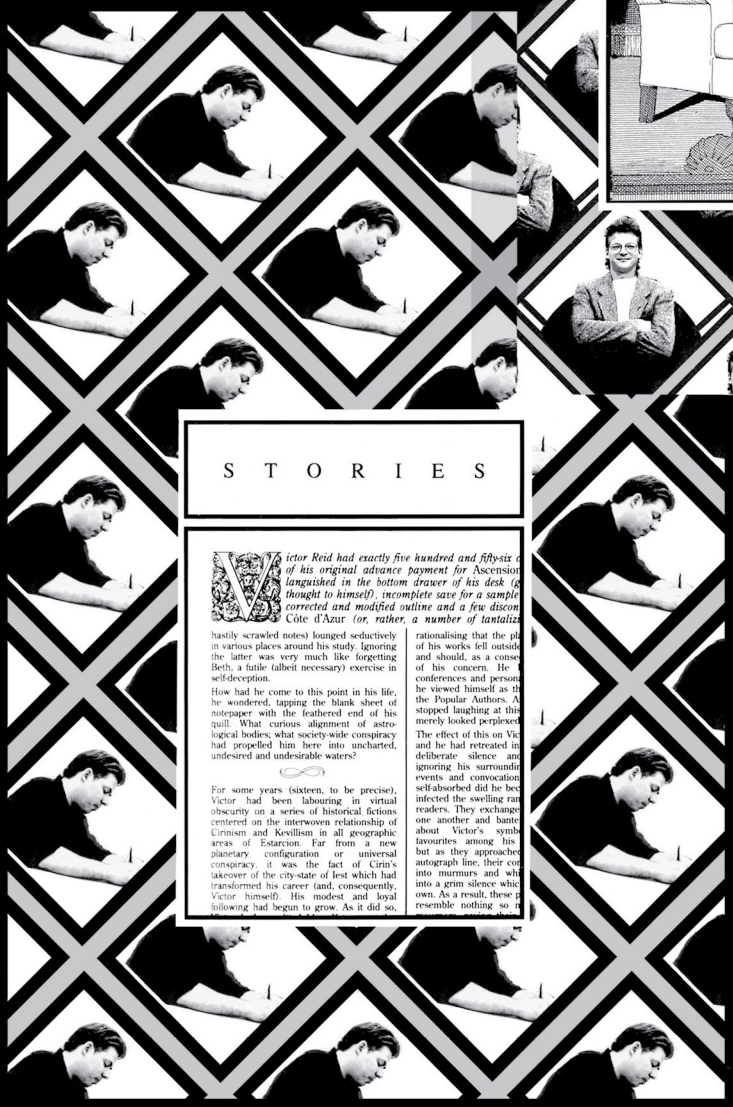
We are indebted to our patrons, Cerebus Archive contributors past and present, who continue to make this project possible. Our many thanks! Contributors to the third Cerebus Archive folio, dubbed CAN3, are listed below.

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Victor Reid had exactly five hundred and fifty-six
of his original advance payment for Ascension
languished in the bottom drawer of his desk (
thought to himself), incomplete save for a sampl
corrected and modified outline and a few discon
Côte d'Azur (or, rather, a number of tantaliz
hastily scrawled notes) lounged seductively
in various places around his study. Ignoring
the latter was very much like forgetting
Beth, a futile (albeit necessary) exercise in
self-deception.
How had he come to this point in his life,
he wondered, tapping the blank sheet of
notepaper with the feathered end of his
quill. What curious alignment of astro-
logical bodies, what society-wide conspiracy
had propelled him here into uncharted,
undesired and undesirable waters?
For some years (sixteen, to be precise),
Victor had been labouring in virtual
obscurity on a series of historical fictions
centered on the interwoven relationship of
Cirinism and Kevillism in all geographic
areas of Estarcion. Far from a new
planetary configuration or universal
conspiracy, it was the fact of Cirin's
takeover of the city-state of Iest which had
transformed his career (and, consequently,
Victor himself). His modest and loyal
following had begun to grow. As it did so,
rationalising that the pl
of his works fell outsid
and should, as a conse
of his concern. He
conferences and person
he viewed himself as t
the Popular Authors. A
stopped laughing at thi
merely looked perplexed
The effect of this on Vi
and he had retreated in
deliberate silence an
ignoring his surroundi
events and convocation
self-absorbed did he bec
infected the swelling ran
readers. They exchange
one another and bante
about Victor's symb
favourites among his
but as they approache
autograph line, their co
into murmurs and wh
into a grim silence whic
own. As a result, these p
resemble nothing so

READS

DAVE SIM & GERHARD

